

# CWRmagazine

Fall 2015  
[www.ptm.org](http://www.ptm.org)



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

## Responding TO THE River of God's GRACE



# What Others Are Saying...



## CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

### I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For

The cover article by Bert Gary in the Summer issue of *CWRm*, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" is one of the most helpful, balanced articles I've ever read on what real "evangelism" means for Christ-followers.

As Bert says, "Paul... (the model evangelist if there ever was one) began relationships of respectful conversation, he spoke of the yearning for something that all humans of every nation and race experience.... Paul pointed to the one God who made us *all*, and he pointed to one man whom God sent to *all*, a man who died and rose from the dead as God's assurance to *all*. Interestingly, Paul never...spoke of or threatened 'hell.'" Amen! Now that's the way to share the "good news."

**Texas**

### In the Shadow of the Mushroom Cloud

I really liked the article "In the Shadow of The Mushroom Cloud" in the Summer *CWR* magazine. I am going to share a link of it on Facebook and send it to others as well. Thank you for writing this!

**New Jersey**

### You Can't Imagine How Much He Loves You

Thank you for the article "You Can't Imagine How Much He Loves You" by Steve McVey in the Summer issue of *CWRm*. I really needed to read this! It was so encouraging and uplifting to me, as I'm sure it will be to many others who have been harmed by abusive, manipulative religious teachings about

God's wrath. Oh what a relief it is to know that God *IS* love!

**North Carolina**

### Like Hearing from God

I want to thank you for all the magazines and other resources you send me. They are truly spiritually uplifting and I am overjoyed when I receive them. It is almost like I am hearing from God.

**Louisiana**

### A More Christlike God

We recently purchased five copies of *A More Christlike God*, by Dr. Brad Jersak, for our small group study. We meet twice weekly in a home to fellowship and discuss the concepts of trinitarianism and the finished work of the cross.

We would basically be considered "inclusionists" if you want a word to define our group.

However words do not describe the wonderful fellowship we experience as we discuss these "new wine" concepts, which are actually the original early church's beliefs.

We are all excitedly looking forward to reading Dr. Jersak's book, in our own time, and then gathering to discuss highlights that have further enlarged our vision of the Father, as He was revealed to us in Jesus.

**Australia**

I recently completed my first reading of *A More Christlike God* by Brad Jersak. What a wonderful gift of insight that cannot breezed through, but chewed slowly and digested. It was my morning companion for quite some time, and I expect to pick it up again and again and gain more than the first time I read it. I am so very thankful for this meaningful

work, and those "awe-ha" moments that will delight so many readers with these precious truths.

**Arizona**

I thank God for making his grace available to Brad Jersak to have the ability and understanding to write *A More Christlike God*.

This book took me places I hadn't gone before. Like we used to say back in the seventies—"Far out!"

How do we begin to describe God who has no origin and who was always here? That's a daunting task. It blows my puny little mind away.

God doesn't mind us putting him under a microscope, but it doesn't mean we will find all the answers we are looking for.

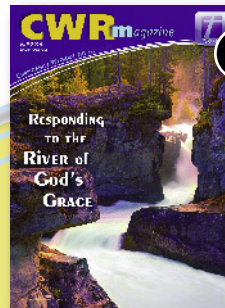
I give this book five out of five stars! It is like an Alfred Hitchcock thriller or a Rod Serling mystery. It is riveting, thought-provoking and intriguing—this book is a must-read!

**New York**

I find Brad Jersak's book, *A More Christlike God*, to be very helpful in knowing God more deeply. I also appreciate the magazines and all the other literature and CDs you send me. Thank you and may God continue to bless everyone at CWR/PTM.

**Wisconsin**

• See page 9 of this issue for details about how to order *A More Christlike God*.



4

## Cover Story

The image of a swift-flowing river

occurs frequently in Scripture. The Psalms and the Prophets give us pictures of lifeless wadis—ravines in the desert—that suddenly fill up with life-giving water during the spring rains. That water is a strong symbol of the blessing of God... giving us the draft of grace that quenches our human thirst.

COVER PHOTO BY JOEL KOOP/DESIGNPICS AND MARV WEGNER—PTM

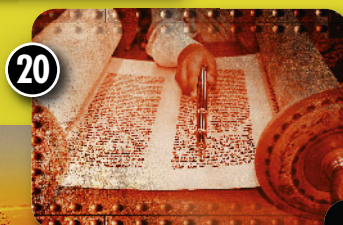
twitter



facebook

Canada Post Publications Mail Sales Agreement No. 40029726  
The address of our lettershop in Canada can be used for the Canadian return address.  
Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to  
Plain Truth  
7496 Bath Road Unit 2  
Mississauga, ON L4T 1L2

- 9** Everything Happens for a Reason...
- 11** Giving Thanks to the Master
- 14** Millennials and Money
- 17** "Are you saved?"
- 20** Inspired, Infallible and Inerrant?
- 26** Are Bible Verses the Worst Thing Ever?
- 28** Disarming Scripture



## Columns:

- 8** Point of View *Brad Jersak*
- 16** The Beautiful Gospel *Brad Jersak*
- 19** Axis of Love *Brian Zahnd*
- 25** Naked Pastor *David Hayward*
- 31** The Rebel God *Derek Flood*

## MISSION STATEMENT

Plain Truth Ministries proclaims Christianity without the religion. We express our Christ-centered ministry as *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*.

## HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

For an electronic subscription go to [www.ptm.org/sub](http://www.ptm.org/sub). The Internet allows us to serve readers around the world. Printed copies of *CWRm* are a benefit mailed to those in North America who financially support CWR/PTM. If you'd like to contribute go to [www.ptm.org/donate](http://www.ptm.org/donate).

## TO UPDATE YOUR ADDRESS

Be sure to notify us immediately of any change in your address by calling us at 1-800-309-4466, visiting [www.ptm.org/change](http://www.ptm.org/change) or writing to *Christianity Without the Religion*, CA 91129. **U.S. Postmaster:** Send address changes to *Christianity Without the Religion*, Pasadena, CA 91129

## TO SEND A LETTER OR E-MAIL

Write to *Christianity Without the Religion magazine*, Pasadena, CA 91129, email us at [managing.editor@ptm.org](mailto:managing.editor@ptm.org) or fax us at Letters to the Editor at 626-358-4846. The editors reserve the right to print or not print comments so addressed, in whole or in part,

as deemed in the public interest, and to print your name and edit the letter for clarity and space. We will protect the confidentiality of correspondence that we deem to be of a personal nature. Correspondence published by Plain Truth Ministries does not necessarily reflect the opinions of Plain Truth Ministries.

## COPYRIGHT & POSTAL info

*CWRm (Christianity Without the Religion magazine)* is published four times a year by Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129. Copyright © 2015 Plain Truth Ministries. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. Standard flats postage paid at Pasadena, CA. Volume 6, Number 3: Fall 2015. Unless noted otherwise, scriptures are quoted from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. *Christianity Without the Religion* is a U.S. trademark.

## SUBMISSIONS

*CWRm* does not publish unsolicited manuscripts. Please review our writers guidelines ([email.managing.editor@ptm.org](mailto:email.managing.editor@ptm.org)) before submitting queries. Include SASE with query. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited artwork, photographs or manuscripts.

## PLAIN TRUTH MINISTRIES

*CWRm* is published by Plain Truth Ministries (PTM). If you are interested in learning more about PTM, visit our website at [www.ptm.org](http://www.ptm.org) (and email us) or write us at Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Plain Truth Ministries gratefully accepts contributions (tax deductible in the U.S.) to further the ongoing work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. We accept donations in U.S. funds by check, money order or credit card. Please visit our secure website [www.ptm.org/donate](http://www.ptm.org/donate), call us at 1-800-309-4466, or write us at Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129.

## EDITORIAL STAFF

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:** Greg Albrecht

**SENIOR EDITOR:** Brad Jersak

**MANAGING EDITOR:** Laura Urista

**ART DIRECTION AND PRODUCTION:** Marv Wegner

**ASSOCIATE EDITOR:** Monte Wolverton

**PUBLISHING AND CIRCULATION DIRECTOR:** Dennis Warkentin





# Responding to the River of God's Grace

by Ron  
Benson

**T**he Tahquamenon River could knock you off your feet. I've enjoyed standing in the cold rushing water, and my kids have had fun attempting to stay on their feet against its flow. Going in wasn't the worst thing that could happen, at least not at the end of summer—it was refreshing. But in the spring, the swollen river is a different matter. It could take your breath away.

The Tahquamenon runs only 89 miles in the Eastern end of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, but it drains 820 square miles of territory, mostly cedar swamps, which makes the water a dark brown from the tannin. Cooling off in

the river is like splashing in cold brewed coffee. (*Do you want your river decaf, half-caf or fully loaded?*)

The most famous part of the

thing—knock people off their feet. At first, it may just be baby steps at the edge of the river, dipping the toes of our hearts into the coolness. But

*What keeps people from dipping their feet into the river?  
What prevents people from accessing the free flow of grace?*

river is the falls—one “upper” and one “lower.” The lower falls are beautiful, but it's the upper falls that get the attention. During the spring run-off, the river sends 50,000 gallons of water *every second* over the 200 foot wide drop and down 45 feet to the rocks below. It's a spectacular sight, exhilarating and powerful.

*When you come to the edge of the falls, you know you're somewhere.*

I've seen grace do the same

then the dawning awareness of God's good news in Jesus can overwhelm, take us by surprise, and bring us to our knees. It's water from a fresh source, full of the evidence of God's love.

*When you come to the edge of grace, you know you're somewhere.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The image of a swift-flowing river occurs frequently in Scripture. The Psalms and the Prophets give us pictures of



*The image of a swift-flowing river occurs frequently in Scripture. The Psalms and the Prophets give us pictures of lifeless wadis—ravines in the desert—that suddenly fill up with life-giving water during the spring rains.*

lifeless wadis—ravines in the desert—that suddenly fill up with life-giving water during the spring rains. That water is a strong symbol of the blessing of God, rushing in on us and giving us the draft of grace that quenches our human thirst. But what is it that brings us there, to the edge of the river?



Wadi Rum desert, Jordan

track record for holy behavior, has an internal magnet that would draw them into the river of God's grace. We might also consider that a reprobate, rebellious sinner has already chosen to run as far away from the water as they can get. In both cases, though, we'd be wrong.

Which leaves the question: **what makes one person receptive to the good news while another person is not?**

\*\*\*\*\*

Jesus addressed this issue head-on in one of his parables. In his story about

farming, he uses the picture of sowing seed—the word of God—in different soils. Each of the locations offers a different set of conditions which affect the viability of the seed.

Obstacles such as birds, thorns, rocky soil and scorching sun do their damage, and the seed does not take. The seed that falls on good soil, however, thrives and

multiplies. The simple conclusion of the story is that the same seed produces different results depending on where it falls. Receptivity depends on the condition of the soil.

Jesus' close followers were confused by the story, and they dogged him for answers to their questions. Jesus

*That water is a strong symbol of the blessing of God, rushing in on us and giving us the draft of grace that quenches our human thirst.*

gives them some answers, but the conclusion is the same. Receptivity to the good news is a matter of the specific condition of the soil—the person who encounters the seed.

Another incident in the life of Jesus reveals more about the issue. Jesus sends his followers on a mission, telling them to go and deliver the good news through the towns and cities of Judea. He tells them before they even get on the road that they will encounter various reactions. Some will listen and be hospitable; others will reject them. Jesus doesn't say much about why, however. He simply assumes that some will be all thumbs-up, others clearly thumbs-down, and he tells his disciples that when rejection happens, they should shake the dust off their feet and move along.

The implication is that Jesus anticipates that some will be receptive and others won't. And that's what we'd expect, right? Except that Jesus is the



Tahquamenon Upper Falls

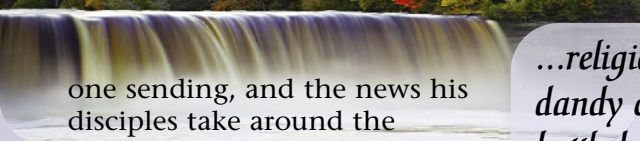
What provides the power that pushes us into the stream?

What makes us ready to jump?

Consider the flip side of that question: **What keeps people from dipping their feet into the river? What prevents people from accessing the free flow of grace? How is it that some seem more receptive to the Living Water than others?**

The issue of receptivity to the





one sending, and the news his disciples take around the territory is the greatest news ever heard, and you'd think that Jesus would have made sure that everyone who heard it received it; that everyone was equally receptive.

But that's not the way it works. There are circumstances that seem to make some ready and others resistant.

If receptivity is based on circumstances, the next question is—under what circumstances are people more or less ready to accept the good news? **What makes one person more receptive to grace than another?**

If you and I were sitting across the table from one another, I think we could come up with a list of circumstances and situations of life that make a person ready to take the plunge into grace. Let's call them "receptivity enhancers." You've already thought about a few of these as you've been reading...

**Life change.** When big shake-ups occur in our lives, emotions and stress can set us up for reassessment. Sometimes we know about life changes ahead of us; sometimes they are a surprise, but big life events tend to bring us closer to the river's edge. Divorce, death, loss of employment, health issues—all of these can be watershed moments. But it doesn't have to be bad news. Getting married, giving birth to a child, having the kids move out, or reaching the magic land of retirement can get us to a place of receptivity where we are ready to hear and respond to the good news.

**Felt needs.** When we are needy, we are receptive. When we have longings—holes in our lives that demand filling—we

*...religious systems want to put the good news into handy-dandy containers so that grace won't be so wild... grace bottled up is more convenient and sanitary and under control.*

soften toward the gospel. Jesus talked about "hungering and thirsting" for the good things of God. That thirst is a built-in compass to get us to the river of grace.

**Intellectual shift.** We like to think that we are resolute in our thinking, and some of us are. But we sometimes come to a place where we need to re-think the things we believe. I'm not suggesting that intellectual pursuit alone can bring receptivity to the good news. But a dramatic shift in the way we think about life and death and God can set us up to be more willing to dip our feet into the water.

**Parental Influence.** We can't deny that "growing up Christian" could impact how receptive we are to God's grace. Conscientious parents, who love God and live authentic Christian lives can certainly impact their children and encourage the reception of grace. On the other hand, the same environment of faith in our families often produces just the opposite: a resistant and stubborn heart.

**Guilt.** When the full weight of our human and personal rebellion comes crashing in on us, it is prime time for the gospel of grace. In fact, we would say that coming to grips with our sin is one of the essential components of coming to Christ. When our lostness forces us to look for a map, or when our "brokenness" leads us to find a fix, we are eager for good news. We're ready to jump into the river without hesitation.

All of these and more can put us into the position of

receptivity. Look over the list again. What do you notice about each of the points? Ask this: How do each of these "receptivity enhancers" come into our lives? How is it that each of these things occur?

Here's the thing: we don't get close to the river because we've steered the flow to ourselves. We are not the ones who direct the course of the waters into our lives. We do not create the conditions under which grace is close and accessible and flowing. The conditions that set us up to be receptive to the grace of God are not controlled by us.

Who then?

This is the thrilling, exhilarating part! It is God himself who brings the river of grace close to us. It is the activity of his grace that brings grace close. The good news is that God is the master of the good news.

Picture the Tahquamenon River. What is it that controls and directs the flow? What is it that creates the Falls? It is gravity.

Think of gravity as the spiritual direction of God's control. He moves and shapes and directs the flow of grace into our lives, using the conditions and circumstances to bring the good news close at those times when we are receptive to him.

Remember the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. It's not just a story about a wanton woman getting water and being offered the ethereal Living Water instead, although that's critical. Added to that is





the event itself. The whole account is an example of how God orchestrates our lives to encounter grace in Jesus. Living Water is under his control, and he purposes and plots to steer the river where he wills.

\*\*\*\*\*

That's not to say that we can't get in the way. We do. But in ways you may not have considered.

First, even though God steers the path of grace into our lives, we have this thing called "self will" which allows rejection and indifference. Any of the receptivity triggers listed above can be thwarted by our strong will to do things our own way. Each of us can name people who have experienced those circumstances, but yet did not respond to grace. The river is offered, but it is never forced. We can get close—close enough to hear the pounding water, even feel the mist created, but we can still turn our backs on the offer.

In addition to our own personal rejection, the gravity of the grace of God can be preempted and interrupted. Grace flows best from high places (God) to low places (our circumstances). But along the way, the flow of grace can be impeded. Consider these possible ways that receptivity can be diminished:

**Cultural Aqueducts.** The flow of grace can be diverted and diluted as the culture around us wins our attention.

When our lives begin to be governed by our culture's definition of success and worthiness and we get busy with all that, grace is channeled away as unnecessary and ineffectual.

**Legalistic Dams.** Nothing can clog up the flow of grace better than dams constructed by religion. It is the nature of legalism to consider grace too "free" and dangerously out of control. In order to keep grace under supervision, religious systems create dams that stop the flow. When legalism says we need to "do this" and "not do that," in order to earn grace, it's putting obstacles into the flow of grace that were never intended.

**Religious Pumping Stations.**

*Jesus addressed this issue head-on in one of his parables... he uses the picture of sowing seed—the word of God—in different soils...the same seed produces different results depending on where it falls. Receptivity depends on the condition of the soil.*

Taking the dam metaphor one step further, religion believes that grace needs help. So it constructs vast and often expensive delivery systems to pump up the flow. This results in not only channeling the power of grace away, but giving it an artificial propulsion it was never designed to need.

**Programmatic Bottled Water.** Added to the above measures to control and monitor grace, religious systems want to put the good news into handy-dandy containers so that grace won't be so wild. So religion creates programs and strategies and campaigns. According to religion, grace bottled up is more convenient and sanitary and under control.

\*\*\*\*\*

God's grace flows according to his gravity and the flow comes from him to us. In spite of attempts to control it, package it, divert it, or dam it up, God's grace enters our lives and urges us to take a dip.

How do we respond to the river of God's grace?

When the river beckons, we move closer. When the circumstances in our lives draw us to grace, we want to move to the edge. When we are thirsty, we dip our faces into the stream.

We acknowledge God's direction of the flow of grace. We thrill to his plans and his timing. We participate



in the gravity of grace, rather than fight it or resist it.

And we jump in. We get wet. We respond to the call of the good news by immersing ourselves in the provision of grace in Christ Jesus.

When you come to the edge of grace, you know you're somewhere. The Falls are waiting. Grace is wild and wooly and ready. Time to jump. □

*Ron Benson jumped, and keeps jumping. He enjoys helping people jump into the river of grace and encourages them to splash around at Grace Christian Fellowship in Bay City, Michigan. You can find more of Ron's writing at [www.ronbenson.net](http://www.ronbenson.net) and connect with him on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/ron.benson.16](https://www.facebook.com/ron.benson.16).*





BRAD JERSAK

**Q** I read your book, *A More Christlike God*. This book has changed my life for the good, and I thank God that He has used you to help give insight. My struggle is this. For so many years I was in the evangelical stream and believed what I was told to believe and thought I was so right because I was evangelical.

Thankfully, this attitude has been arrested as I listen and learn as God teaches me through theologians such as yourself.

I sense a feeling of standing on sand instead of rock as I am trying to find what is solid. I used to take Scripture pretty much at face value. The problem has now become "How do I now read Scripture?" I am not a theologian nor heavily immersed in understanding the culture of the day when the Bible was written. I find I am now feeling a little leery of Scripture because I fear I am not understanding it correctly.

—Canada

**A** First, I completely recognize the feeling you're describing. And foremost, our answer must be that those shifting sands must and will give way to the stability found in Jesus alone. "On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand"...even the Scriptures themselves, because they are so dependent

on the ebb and flow of our own interpretative whims. So let Jesus Christ be your solid rock. What we know of him includes both the testimony of the Gospels and our experience of him through the Spirit.

Never abandon the Bible, but when you read it, recall that the Bible itself (and Jesus most of all) is very clear on this: we must read the whole Bible as an epic story leading to and climaxing in Christ.

That means everything we read in the Bible must be read through that lens—where Jesus

***...the Bible itself (and Jesus most of all) is very clear on this: we must read the whole Bible as an epic story leading to and climaxing in Christ.***

himself is our approach to the Bible. And he has promised that his Spirit would also unveil the Scriptures, but only as we read them in the light of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 2 and 2 Corinthians 3, Paul insists that only Christ-centered, Spirit-led reading leads to life.

The claim that the Bible is our final authority (which the Bible flatly denies) is actually very deceptive, because in fact, we sought sturdy ground not in the book itself, but in our own interpretations of the book or those of some earthly pastor, teacher or system that fulfilled our desire for black and white certitude.

Letting go of that false sense of certainty can feel as scary as walking on water. You might start panicking as you feel your faith sinking—but there is Jesus, reaching out his hand, saying, "Trust ME." He's a

living person, so you can't master or control him like you would a book, but that's why it's called faith. Take his hand!

Can you trust him? He'll prove to be the rock and anchor who is far more reliable than the latest trends in Christian culture or private interpretation.

So with your Bible, I suggest that when reading any passage, begin by asking, "Where is Jesus in this text or story?" If you can't see him there yet, then that text isn't for you for that moment. But it would also

help if we would spend far greater proportion of our Bible-time marinating in the Gospels than we have in the past.

We could take a cue here from the Jesuits, who were also called the Society of Jesus. At one time, they read all four Gospels every week. Then everything else they read had to revolve around that and serve that vision of Jesus. I think if Christ-followers were to even read all four Gospels just once a year, Jesus would prove his promise in Matthew 7:24-27 to be true: Who is the wise person who builds her house upon the rock? "Everyone who hears these words of mine [Jesus' actual words in the Sermon on the Mount] and puts them into practice."

The words and works of Christ—now there's a rock you can stand on! □



# "EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON." (OR...NOT SO MUCH?)

by Brad Jersak and Dominic Jersak

*Everything happens for a reason. But sometimes, that reason is you're stupid and you make bad decisions.*

—Demotivational Meme

## Thought Experiment

*Response:* "It was meant to be. Everything happens for a reason."

*Thought experiment:* Describe the scenario that led to the response.

In our hypothetical scenario, something bad happened. Maybe not truly tragic—but somewhere in the flat tire to romantic break-up spectrum. Or if you're gutsy, you could go as severe as bankruptcy. Or as irrelevant as a traffic jam.

"It was meant to be." A kind word of consolation.

## I think this optimistic proverb needs a little deconstruction, because embracing it as a life philosophy backfires at the very worst times.

"Everything happens for a reason." An appeal to a bigger picture, a higher power, a cosmic plan. And the reason is apparently a mystery, but probably something better than how circumstances seem on the surface.

For pastoral reasons that will become obvious, we think this optimistic proverb needs a little deconstruction, because embracing it as a life philosophy backfires at the very worst times.



## Consolation or Setup?

Why do we go there? The motivational draw of this platitude is the comfort it offers. At first glance, it promises meaning (even

if hidden) to what feels like chaos. It offers the hope of a positive purpose behind random events. Some assign this plan and purpose to "universe," others to "sovereignty" or "providence."

But how relevant does an event need to be for us to summon a reason? Do we justify a traffic jam because it led to the perfect parking spot? Maybe you're not that petty. What if the traffic jam meant I missed a plane that crashes? Too

bad providence didn't cause *everyone* to miss the plane! Are only some worthy ("elect") of sovereign favor?

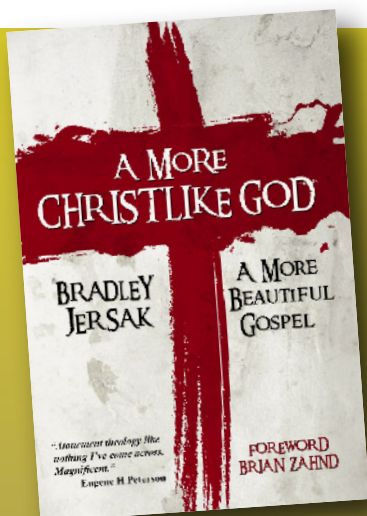
So maybe some events don't happen for any significant reason. They had a cause, no doubt, and likely also an *effect*. But what I might eat for breakfast or the fact that someone leaves the toilet seat up probably had no providential *purpose* of note. Even if you appeal

## NEW FROM CWRpress!

***A More Christlike God***, written by Senior Editor Brad Jersak. As we prepare to send this issue to the printer, ***A More Christlike God*** is enjoying brisk sales and favorable reviews. Acclaimed author and scholar Eugene H. Peterson (*The Message Bible*) calls it, "Atonement theology like nothing I've come across." This groundbreaking book takes readers beyond the ugly parodies of Christianity into the beautiful gospel of a more Christlike God.

To order call 1-800-309-4466

or go to: [www.ptm.org/christlike](http://www.ptm.org/christlike)





## CHRIST TAKES UGLY THINGS AND IS ABLE TO MAKE THEM BEAUTIFUL... WITH A BETTER PURPOSE THAT MUST ONE DAY OUTSHINE THE CRUELEST OF FATES.



to the “the butterfly effect” in chaos theory—where a butterfly’s wings cause a rippling series of effects that lead to a hurricane—this is not a *reason* for either. It’s just an equation. There’s no intent, which is what the original slogan implies.

Or as scientists and statisticians tell us, “correlation is not causation.” Just because the decrease in pirates over the last 130 years correlates to the rise in global temperatures, should we conclude that the lack of pirates caused climate change?<sup>1</sup>

### Is Calamity “Meant to Be”?

Moving from the trivial to the momentous, how far can you take this appeal to sovereign design? Let’s say it’s a matter of life and death...where surely

cruel one for sure. Just watch the news.

Toxic belief systems offer the comfort of God’s bigger plan, but then abandon you when that plan offers no redemptive purpose. And guess who gets thrown under the bus? God, of course. If *that’s* the kind of Father we have, no thanks!

### The Blame Game

“Everything happens for a reason” was supposed to be redemptive, but when it’s not, maybe its bumper sticker philosophy still holds sway because it offers something else: someone to blame. It gets me off the hook of responsibility and defers it to God’s wisdom and judgment. But the blowback for

as it always has. Who gets to play Achan this time (Joshua 7-9)? Who’s the scapegoat going to be?

### A Reason Happens for Everything

What if there is no redemptive *purpose* for trials and tragedies? What if bad stuff just *happens*? BUT also, causes and purposes aside, what if God is so good and his redemption so amazing that he can take the evils and afflictions (and even the scapegoating!) that he had *no part* in causing and *no intent* of inflicting—take them all up and into himself and transmute them into something good, even if that good must often await the hope of resurrection?

This is the message and meaning of the Cross: redemption, not because of your suffering, but because of what Christ can do by suffering with us.

So no, everything *does not* happen for a reason. No, it was not *meant to be*. But there is “a Reason *Who* happens for everything” (a twist coined by my friend Marv Wegner).

Christ takes ugly things and is able to make them beautiful, trumping evil intent and random accidents with a better purpose (Genesis 50:20) that must one day outshine the cruelest of fates (literally). To you Scripture says, “...our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

*In the end, you are his redemptive purpose.* ☐

## TOXIC BELIEF SYSTEMS OFFER THE COMFORT OF GOD’S BIGGER PLAN, BUT THEN ABANDON YOU WHEN THAT PLAN OFFERS NO REDEMPTIVE PURPOSE.

human life warrants God’s “control.” Okay. Try these on:

A baby dies in miscarriage. *Everything has a reason?*

An infant dies of SIDS. *It was meant to be?*

A toddler drowns in the uncovered hot tub. *Everything has a reason?*

A child is abducted and murdered or stricken dead by leukemia. *It was meant to be?*

Oh, there are causes and effects all right, but God’s intent and purpose?

Last we checked, providence was supposed to be about “care.” If we imagine an interventionist God who ordains and governs every act—including evil, according to my Calvinist friends—he’s a

this move is horrendous. When calamity strikes, God is responsible, but sinners are to blame.

You’ve heard it repeatedly: HIV was sent by God, Hurricane Katrina was sent by God, the jets that hit the twin towers were sent by God (because *everything* is sent by God). And why would a good God send such catastrophes? To punish America of course (because it’s all about America). And why target America? It’s the homosexuals...*obviously*!

“Everything happens for a reason,” and when the “everything” is bad, it’s punishment—and if it’s punishment, it’s for sin. And the whodunit mystery begins

1. Erika Anderson, “True Fact: the Lack of Pirates is Causing Global Warming,” *Forbes.com* (3/23/2012).





# Giving Thanks to the Master

BY GREG ALBRECHT

Some people think they can't experience a time of Thanksgiving without turkey, pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce. Some think that they can't experience a time of Thanksgiving (in Canada the second Monday in October and in the United States the last Thursday of November) unless they travel to a specific place and visit with specific people. Some summarize a perfect time of Thanksgiving as including the four F's—food, family, friends and football!

But real thanksgiving is not determined by food or specific traditions or by travel—the one necessary ingredient to any time of thanksgiving, whether it is a national day celebrated in October or November, or whether it is any day of the year—the absolute necessary ingredient is the Master—Jesus Christ—the One toward whom our thanksgiving is directed.

Luke 17:7-10:

*"Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you've done everything*

*you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"*

The only sermons I've heard based on this passage all had to do with a corrective message, telling me and others listening that we were unprofitable servants, and in order to become profitable servants we needed to do more, give more and work harder.

I assure you that no such meaning or interpretation was intended by the Master who gave us this parable.

Jesus presents two main characters in this parable—the master and the master's slave. Slavery is a theme in this parable—so let's discuss it. For us, in this 21st century, slavery is such a moral evil that we can't imagine Jesus using slavery as an example. But the parables of Jesus are filled with references to servants and stewards—and in many cases

..real thanksgiving is not determined by food or specific traditions or by travel...the absolute necessary ingredient is the Master—Jesus Christ—the One toward whom our thanksgiving is directed.

those individuals were what we could call slaves today.

Since slavery is evil, why then is Jesus talking about it? Jesus, as he often does in his parables, is using a physical illustration from the culture of his day to draw and impart a spiritual lesson.

Jesus did not condone slavery then, nor does he now. He talked about slaves and servants as examples, because they represented a large segment of that society.

The people to whom Jesus ministered were living in an occupied country—in that sense they were slaves themselves. The Jews in Palestine at that time were occupied by a military power, they were heavily taxed and they were oppressed.

Jesus ministered during a time when slavery was a major part of life. Estimates vary, but there may have been almost three million slaves in Italy alone, supporting the economy of the country in which the city of Rome was located, and whose name was given to the vast empire it managed and controlled. The Roman empire survived and thrived on the backs of millions of slaves. While slavery was and is barbaric, Jesus taught spiritual truth based on this evil practice.

In those days you could become a bond-servant in several ways:

- You could have been a prisoner of war, captured when the armies of Rome overcame another nation or state, and

thus forced into a life of slavery to your captors.

- You could have become a bond-servant because of your poverty—you were so in debt that you had to sell your services to pay that debt.

- Your parents might have been slaves, and by virtue of

your birth you became a slave—many were born as slaves in the Roman Empire. Most slaves were produced this way—adult slaves gave birth to slave children just as cattle would breed and produce young. Slaves were property.

- In some cases, if an otherwise free couple had a baby but could not provide for it due to impoverishment, their baby might become the property of a slave owner.

While there is no question that slavery was, and sadly in some parts of our world today usually is barbaric, brutal and inhumane, some slave owners in the Roman Empire treated their slaves with kindness.

Sometimes a slave, particularly a younger slave, was actually adopted by the master and considered as an equal heir with other children. The New Testament of course uses this picture as one illustration of the relationship God offers to us, by his grace.

### Three Grace-Based Lessons

With that said, let's note three major themes and lessons we can learn from this parable in Luke 17:7-10:

1) **All humans are enslaved in one way or another.** This is not to minimize the evil of actually owning another human being, but it is important to realize the spiritual implications and lessons Jesus, and other New

Testament writers, drew from the barbaric institution of slavery.

We are either slaves to sin (addicted to any number of human behaviors, including Christ-less religion) or we are voluntarily slaves of Jesus—and when we are his servants, we are free in Christ.

In that regard Peter begins his second letter by saying, “Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” James begins the book that bears his name by saying, “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Jude begins his brief letter with these words, “Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.” And Paul begins the majestic book of Romans by writing, “Paul, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ...”

Here's what Paul says to the Galatians, admonishing them not to go back into religious slavery by willingly subjecting themselves to the old covenant, the law of Moses:

- In Galatians 4:8-9 he says, *“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”*

- And in Galatians 5:1 he encourages them, *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again with a yoke of slavery.”*

So we must ask ourselves—whom will we serve? Will we

be enslaved by sin or religious teaching or will we accept being free in Christ, which means being his bond-servant?

We know that the man in Jesus' parable was a common slave, a bond-servant, because after a hard day's work on the farm he wasn't allowed to eat until he first prepared dinner for his master.

Again, don't think that Jesus is condoning such a practice. He's not offering his opinion about the practice—he's merely using it as an illustration. That's not the way he treated his disciples.

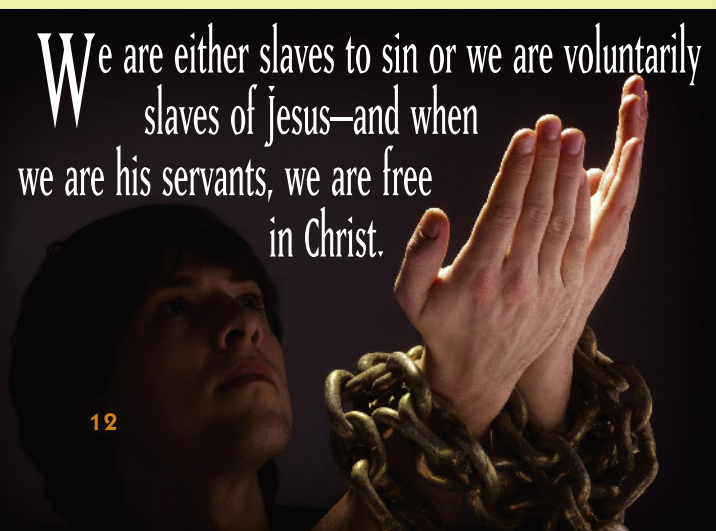
All Jesus was saying is that it was normal—the common etiquette of the day was for the master and his family to eat first, and then the slaves would eat, and sometimes all they had to eat was what was left.

In many of Jesus' parables, as is the case with this one, the parable talks about the normal and the expected—until Jesus drops a bombshell. Jesus would often isolate a particular situation, something to which his listeners could easily relate, drawing them into the story, and then drawing a completely unexpected lesson.

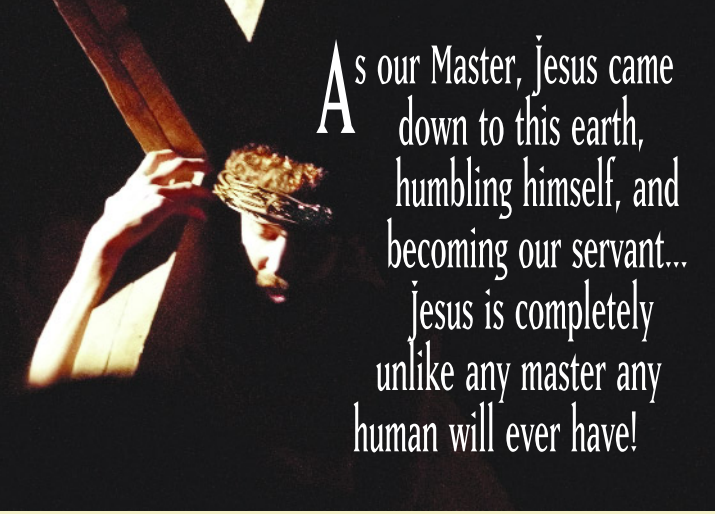
The disciples were listening to Jesus' description of the bond-servant, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The disciples might have been thinking of themselves as the owner of the farm, and expecting Jesus to tack on a moral to the story—something like “So, like a slave-owner, when you become apostles, don't let people get too familiar with you. Remember that you are in charge. You have to keep their respect. Be a strong leader.”

But then Jesus concludes the parable with the completely unexpected, bombshell-like lesson, *“So you also, when you*

**We** are either slaves to sin or we are voluntarily slaves of Jesus—and when we are his servants, we are free in Christ.







As our Master, Jesus came  
down to this earth,  
humbling himself, and  
becoming our servant...  
Jesus is completely  
unlike any master any  
human will ever have!

**completely  
unlike any  
other master.**  
As our Master,  
Jesus came  
down to this  
earth, humbled  
himself, and  
became our  
servant. The  
Master is  
actually our  
servant—a

And yet, even in our  
unworthiness, even though we  
are bond-servants of Jesus  
Christ, bought and paid for,  
still God lavishes all blessings  
on us, even to the point that  
God the Father adopts us as his  
very own children. We are  
heirs of the kingdom—but  
nothing we can ever do can in  
any way earn us that status.

This is not to say that we  
don't have responsibilities as  
the bond-servants of Jesus  
Christ. We live in God's  
house—he provides for us, and  
he gives us the opportunity to  
cook, to clean, to plant and to  
harvest. He does not owe us  
anything for our work, but we  
owe him everything. We are  
thankful for that.

The imagery of the master  
and slave is important for us as  
we come to a deeper  
appreciation of the loving  
relationship God offers to us.  
The master and slave  
relationship we have with Jesus,  
our Master, is not one that is  
about a brutal, unforgiving and  
abusive relationship.

It is a relationship that  
actually helps us give thanks  
for no longer being slaves of  
sin and religion—we are  
now enabled to serve a loving  
and gracious Master. The  
illustration of the master and  
the slave is a picture of God's  
willingness to take us in all of  
our spiritual unworthiness and  
imperfection and spiritually  
re-birth us, making us a part of  
his very own family.

What then are we thankful  
for? Most of all, we are not  
thankful for a what—we are  
thankful for a Who.

We are thankful, in the  
ultimate, final, highest and  
supreme sense for the  
immeasurable grace of our  
Master. Most of all, we give  
thanks to the Master. □

*have done everything you were  
told to do, should say, 'We are  
unworthy bond-servants; we have  
only done our duty.'"*

So Jesus was saying that his  
disciples were bond-servants  
and he was the master! With  
that in mind, let's consider a  
second major theme and lesson  
of this parable:

**2) We must beware of  
thinking that God owes us  
something for what we have  
done.** A physical bond-servant  
in the Roman Empire did not  
work for pay—they worked  
because they were owned by  
their master. In a similar way,  
we as Christians serve Christ  
because he owns us—he  
bought and paid for us.

As bond-servants of Jesus  
Christ we can never think that  
our obedience and acts of  
service to God obligate him to  
reward us with any eternal  
spiritual compensation. May we  
never think so highly of our  
accomplishments that we feel  
God owes us special favors.

This parable does not mean  
we have to work harder to gain  
God's acceptance and love so  
that one day we can be a  
profitable servant—the parable  
means that we are unable, given  
the relationship God gives to us,  
to deserve his love on the basis  
of our accomplishments.

Further, here's a third  
insight—a third theme:

**3) As our Master, Jesus is**

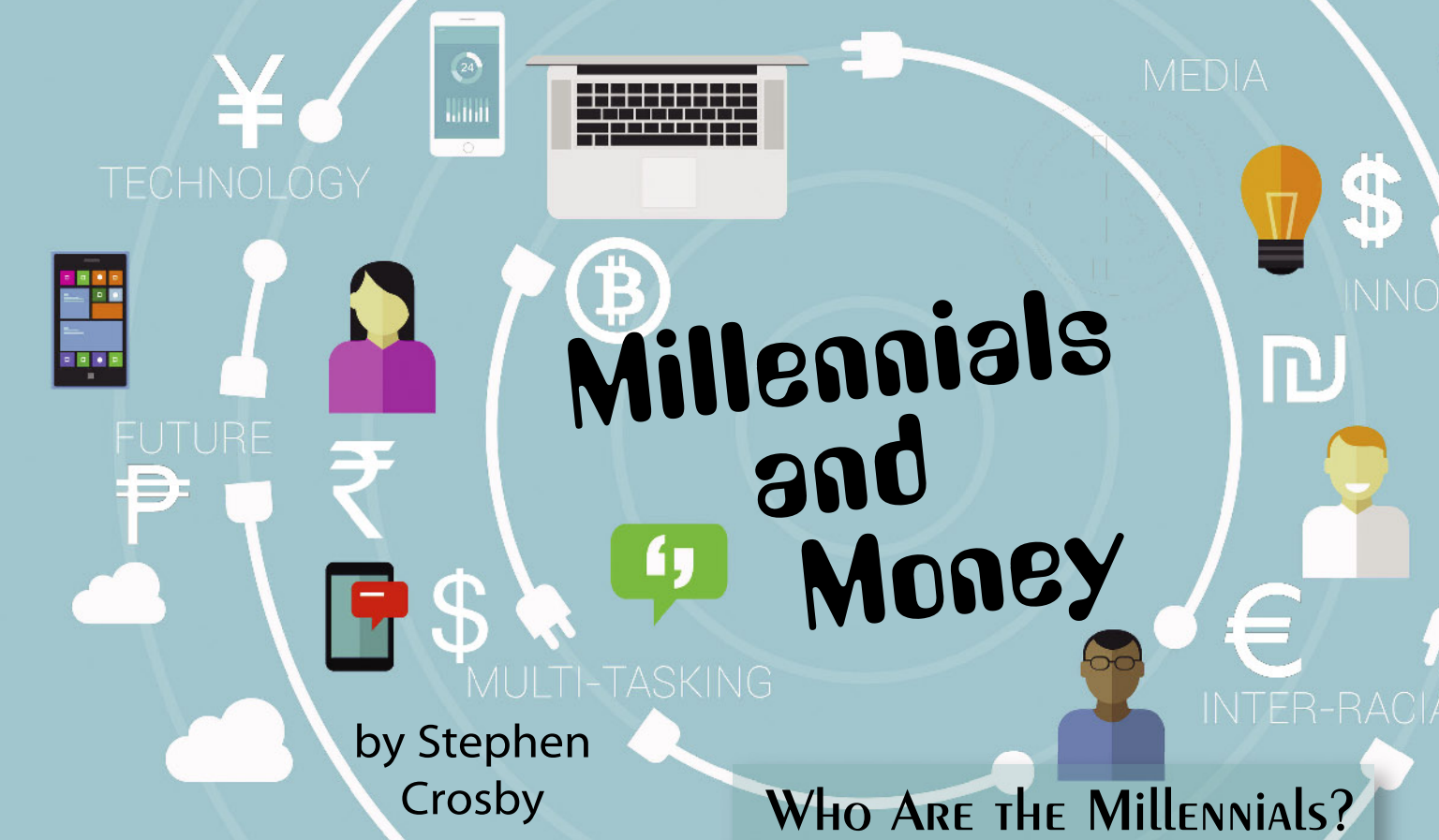
relationship which clarifies  
what it means to be a bond-  
servant of Jesus Christ. Jesus is  
completely unlike any master  
any human will ever have!

In Luke 17:9 Jesus asks if the  
master will thank the bond-  
servant after the bond-servant  
works all day in the field and  
then prepares dinner for the  
master before eating himself.

The word "thank" in verse 9  
is the Greek word "charis." It's  
often translated as "grace,"  
sometimes as "favor" or  
"credit." Jesus is saying, in  
effect, "Don't expect to earn  
credits with me by doing what  
you have been asked to do.  
You can't earn anything in our  
relationship, any more than a  
bond-servant can earn  
anything in his or her  
relationship with their master."

The bond-servant or slave  
isn't given any special  
privileges because he or she  
fulfills his or her duties.

Grace is not something we  
earn from God—grace is God's  
gift, given to us in spite of our  
performance and efforts, not  
because of it. We cannot earn  
God's grace because we are the  
bond-servants of Jesus Christ.  
We are, in that sense,  
unworthy servants—for truly  
only God is ultimately and  
eternally worthy. We are  
unworthy in the sense that our  
obedience does not merit  
anything before God.



While reviewing some statistics regarding Millennial Generation giving for my book, I saw some consistent values among the Millennial Generation that influence their giving. I believe the values represented by Millennials [see sidebar Who are the Millennials?] more accurately reflect Jesus' kingdom than the way we have been doing church for centuries, especially the last sixty-seventy

**I BELIEVE THE VALUES REPRESENTED BY MILLENNIALS MORE ACCURATELY REFLECT JESUS' KINGDOM THAN THE WAY WE HAVE BEEN DOING CHURCH FOR CENTURIES, ESPECIALLY THE LAST SIXTY-SEVENTY YEARS!**

years! It would be good for all of us to allow ourselves to be "reformed" in our giving by what Millennials are doing.

**1. Millennials are concerned for those who have less.**

## WHO ARE THE MILLENNIALS?

Millennials (also known as the Millennial Generation, Twenty-somethings, Trophy Kids or Generation Y) are the demographic cohort following Generation X. Researchers and commentators use birth years ranging from the early 1980s to the early 2000s. Some common traits among Millennials include civic-mindedness (with a strong sense of community, both local and global), confidence, tolerance, as well as narcissism and a sense of entitlement. Millennials tend to have a deep desire to make the world a better place, with an understanding that doing so requires building new institutions while working inside and outside of existing institutions.

How about a kingdom frame of reference rather than unbridled self-interest? Are the coffee bar and the new carpet in the lobby of a church building really a higher priority than a widow who needs food or a single mom who needs the rent paid?

**2. Millennials want to give to global causes.**

Millennials are more concerned about a water pump for a village in the Sudan than whether or not the youth group has a "hot worship





## MILLENNIALS DESIRE A STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIP IN WHAT THEY GIVE TO; THEY WANT THEIR VOICE TO BE HEARD.

team” and needs a new soundboard and lighting system. Caring for needs in distant lands in preference to one’s own needs? Sounds like the kingdom of Jesus to me.

**3. Millennials tend to see the kingdom as broader than, and outside of, the weekly church meeting.**

A local community expression of faith

is important to Millennials. However, Jesus’s kingdom is bigger than any local expression. The totality of kingdom life is not contained within “meeting times.” Meeting times should be the fueling station for living times!

**4. Millennials want to be active in the culture without giving up allegiance to Christ.**

Millennials rightly reject (for what it is) the: “I got my salvation ticket punched, let the nasty world go to hell, because it is all going to burn up anyway” attitude. They want to engage and penetrate the culture as ambassadors of another king and kingdom, bringing His life, love and power into every facet of mortal existence.

**5. Millennials desire a stakeholder relationship in what they give to; they want their voice to be heard.**

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the ultimate act of having a “stakeholder” relationship! A functional family shares the burden of the family. A functional family talks about issues that affect the family. A functional family

admitted, repented of and forgiveness asked. Beliefs and practices that were used to sustain a culture of betrayal and abuse must be abandoned. Millennials and others have been severely wounded and damaged by this, and they want nothing to do with anything remotely smelling like it.

Once hearts are proven safe through relationship, the

**MANY IN THE PREVIOUS GENERATIONS OF LEADERS IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRIES (BOTH SILENT GENERATION AND BOOMERS), HAVE BETRAYED TRUST IN THE MATTER OF FINANCES. THIS MUST BE SQUARELY FACED, ADMITTED, REPENTED OF AND FORGIVENESS ASKED.**

expects everyone except the most young to have a stake in the welfare of the family.

**6. Millennials require a high level of trust to be proven in their giving.**

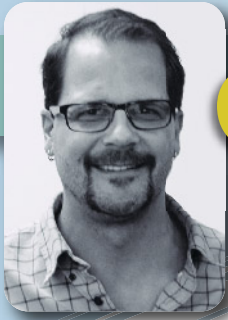
Trust is difficult to earn, easy to lose, and next to impossible to recover, short of something miraculous. Many in the previous generations of leaders in Christian ministries (both Silent Generation and Boomers), have betrayed trust in the matter of finances. This must be squarely faced,

younger generation will increase the deposit of their lives in those hearts, and an economy of gift exchange based on mutual reciprocity in love and grace will occur. This includes financial giving. □

*Since 1975, Stephen Crosby and his wife Rita have ministered in churches, conferences and Bible Schools in nations on four continents. Steve and Rita reside in the suburbs of Charlotte, NC. For more information visit [www.stevencrosby.org](http://www.stevencrosby.org).*



**MILLENNIALS REQUIRE A HIGH LEVEL OF TRUST TO BE PROVEN IN THEIR GIVING. TRUST IS DIFFICULT TO EARN, EASY TO LOSE, AND NEXT TO IMPOSSIBLE TO RECOVER...**



# CWRm

BRAD JERSAK

THE BEAUTIFUL GOSPEL

## Don't Water It Down

In the mid-90's, war was raging in Yugoslavia. As the nation imploded and divided in mass ethnic vendettas, thousands were desperate to flee the cycle of eye-for-an-eye vengeance. Our local church, known for peacemaking and welcoming the stranger, sponsored some refugee families searching for a new life in Canada. That is how I met Ranislav.

Now, Ranislav was a Serbian, and the Serbians had been branded by our Western media as "the bad guys" in the war. Or was it the Muslims? Or the Croats? With death and atrocities on all sides, Rano saw hatred, killing and revenge as the real "bad guy," not whole people groups. He had seen this up close.

Rano's wife had been killed by sniper fire at the kitchen table while feeding their three young children. Now this widower had come to Vancouver, quite lost but determined to make a fresh start in a land of peace. We rented an apartment for him for a year and one of our members gave him work at his factory.

Even as they settled in, the family showed us their gratitude by preparing a Serbian feast for us. As dad played the mad chef, his children brought us plate after plate, course after course, of ethnic food. My Canadian palate was overwhelmed by how rich the pastry was, how filling the entrees were, how sweet the desserts were and how strong the drinks were. It took some getting used to. When I say "strong drinks," I remember Rano insisting we toast our new friendship with Bosnian plum brandy (more flammable than drinkable) and his special coffee.

The coffee was Mediterranean mega-espresso served in tiny cups—virtually ground syrup. Then Rano added sugar. One, two, three, four spoons! This was his invitation to open teasing. Before long, Ranislav knew why. Canadians love their coffee, but Rano was horrified at how watery it is. I'm sure he spit out his first cup. "What is this brown water?" he cried, "That's not coffee! Why do you water it down?" he cried. After many years in

Canada, Rano says, "Now I am Canadian. I can drink the brown water."

I see a parable here. I think of the way the Beautiful Gospel has called us out of the land of eye-for-an-eye justice, wrath and retribution. The Jesus Way has given us a fresh start in a new land. We come with gratitude to Christ's kingdom, a sumptuous banquet of grace.

Isaiah describes the New Covenant as "a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of the best of meats and the finest of wines" (Isaiah 25:6). This radical grace, this festival of forgiveness...it takes some getting used to.

In truth, some can't bear it. They need to water it down. They can't explain the Cross in terms of radical grace...they must pour in a little wrath. Surely God can't just forgive us; he must have been getting even. So this rich feast of radical grace is watered down with doctrines of violence, vengeance and vendetta—remnants of the old country. I'd call that the "brown water gospel."

Jesus called it "the leaven of the Pharisees," a form of hypocrisy (Luke 21:1) that sets aside the commandments of God for the doctrines of men (Mark 7:5-13), that footnotes God's unfailing mercy with human cravings for legalized wrath.

Ironically, sometimes we are accused of watering down the gospel because we expunge that very leaven. So were Jesus and Paul. Jesus was despised for saying, "Those who are forgiven much, love much" (Luke 7:47). Paul was attacked for saying, "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more" (Romans 5:20). They were actually accused of preaching a gospel too rich with scandalous mercy or abundant grace. God's rich mercy and delicious grace *never* water down the gospel.

Rather, our fleshly demand for vengeance (our need for sin to be punished) projected onto our loving heavenly Father spoils the feast and ruins the coffee. We left that war! Don't go back! Spit out the brown water! The gospel of Jesus is God's self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love—rich and sweet! **Don't water it down!** □

—Brad Jersak



by Brad Jersak

# "Are You Saved?"

I never used to blink twice when asked. When someone asked me if I was *saved* I recognized the question was as normal as asking a stranger whose accent you recognized where they were from.

"Are you Canadian?"

"Yes, how did you know, eh?"

"Oh, I could tell by your accent?"

"Are you saved?"

"Sure am! Glad you could tell!"

After a while, the "are you saved" question *did* cause me to blink—sometimes because of mistaken identity ("No, I'm a

Buddhist") and other times because it felt invasive (like, "Are you pregnant" or "Are you gay?"). I also began to wince because I am suspicious about our assumptions as to what *saved* means.

So...are you saved? How?

And when? In Scripture, depending on the passage, *saved* can be past, present, provisional or prospective:

- **Past**—being *saved* can be framed as an experience we've already had ("...for it is by grace that you *have been saved* ...") as in Ephesians 2:8; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5. Even assuming I was saved, when exactly? When Jesus died or when he rose? When I believed, or when I said "The Sinner's Prayer" or

when I got baptized?

- **Present**—being saved is also described as an ongoing process in the present ("...to us who are being saved...") as in 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 2 Corinthians 2:15. I'm on a salvation journey, whenever that starts and ends. "Being saved" means I am still a "work in progress."

- **Provisional**—other texts present "being saved" as a conditional promise ("...you are *being saved*, if you hold fast...") as in 1 Corinthians 15:2 or Hebrews 3:6-14. Many have debated how secure our salvation is. Once saved, always saved? Or might we still fall away and "lose" our salvation?

- **Prospective**—finally, the Bible also reserves salvation for the future ("...how much more *shall we be saved*...") as in Romans 5:9-10; 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10; and 1 Peter 1:5. In this case, the fullness of salvation is only finally experienced at the



*The complexity of this layered salvation can cause me to wince when someone reduces it to a particular, calendar-ready crisis.*





***To “be justified” is not just a verdict. It describes restoration to a covenant relationship...and Jesus has done this for us. He has reconciled us, justified us and restored us.***

resurrection, when we are completely restored in every way—body, soul and spirit.

The complexity of this layered salvation can cause me to wince when someone reduces it to a particular, calendar-ready crisis. Some relate to a “born again” moment like Paul’s conversion. Others, like Peter, may feel their faith grows in fits and starts as the seeds of the word break through alternating strata of soil and clay. When exactly was Peter *saved*? That’s harder to nail down.

One helpful snapshot comes from the book of Romans 5, where Paul offers clear categories for the past, present and future of God’s work of grace.

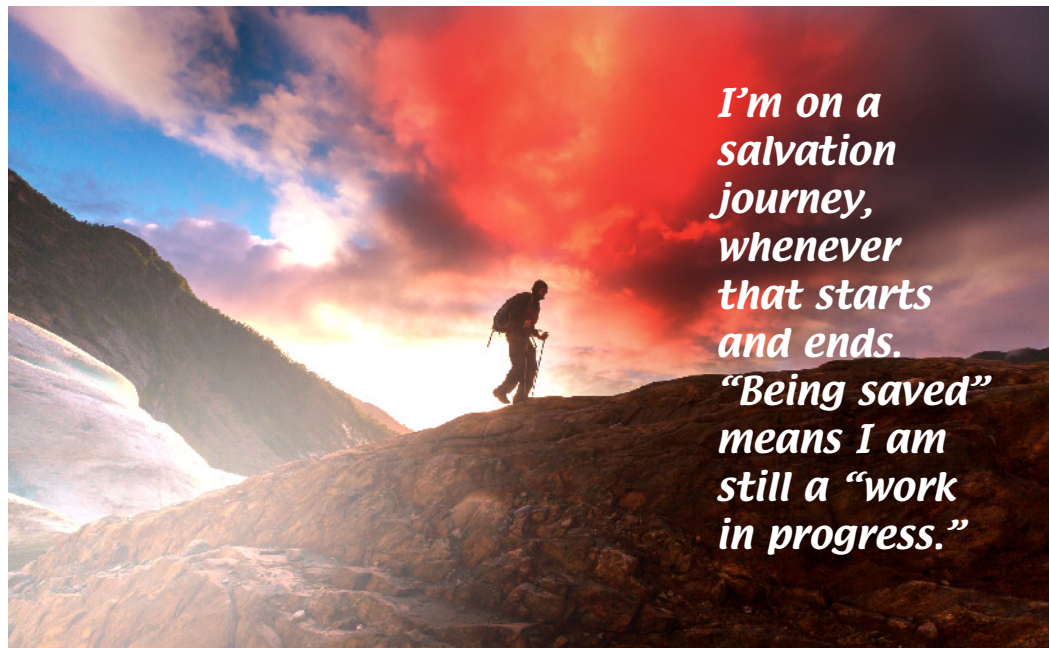
In verses 6-11, Paul talks about *reconciliation* and *justification*. Reconciliation is obviously relational...as in the parable of the prodigal son who is restored to his father. But so is justification. The Reformers who made justification a *legal* solution to “guilt” through

God’s declaration of “imputed (assigned) righteousness” missed the mark. To “be justified” is not just a verdict. It describes restoration to a covenant relationship...and Jesus has done this for us. He has reconciled us, justified us and restored us.

Now in Romans 5, all of that is in the past tense. Not just *when we believed*, but before that—*when* we were without strength, still sinners, still enemies—indeed, even before that! *When* were we reconciled? *When* were we justified? Paul tells us: *when* Christ died for us!

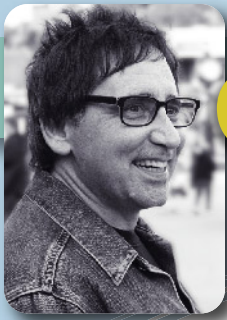
Oddly, Paul doesn’t say that we were saved, either at the Cross or when we responded to the Cross. *Saved* in this passage (and all of Romans) is tied to a future event: our resurrection. Just as we were reconciled by Jesus’ death, so we will be saved (i.e. *resurrected*) by Jesus’ resurrection.

Paul promises, “...if while we were enemies we *were reconciled* to God through the death of his Son, how much more having been reconciled *shall we be saved by his life*” (Romans 5:10, my emphasis). In other words, our past reconciliation is the promise of our future salvation...*if what?* If God is faithful! We can trust that God is faithful. This is Paul’s Gospel to the Romans—and to us, thanks be to God! ☐



***I’m on a salvation journey, whenever that starts and ends. “Being saved” means I am still a “work in progress.”***





# CWRm

BRIAN ZAHND

AXIS OF LOVE

## Jesus IS What God Has to Say

One of the most mysterious aspects of the Transfiguration is the appearance of Moses and Elijah—these two giant figures from the Old Testament—conversing with a glorified Christ. They signify the Law and the Prophets. On Mount Tabor, Moses and Elijah are summoned from the Old Testament past to give their final witness.

The goal of the Law and the Prophets was to produce a just and worshipping society. Jesus and his kingdom are where that project finds its fulfillment. The new society formed around Jesus was what the Law and the Prophets were aiming for all along. The Transfiguration is where the Old Testament hands the project of redemption over to Jesus.

But initially Peter misinterpreted what the presence of Moses and Elijah meant. Peter's first impulse was to build three memorial tabernacles on Tabor, treating Moses, Elijah, and Jesus as approximate equals. But Peter's idea received a strong rebuke when the voice from heaven said, "***This is my beloved Son, listen to him!***"

Jesus is the true and living Word of God. Jesus is what the Law and Prophets point toward and bow to. Jesus is what the Old Testament was trying to say, but could never fully articulate. Jesus is the perfect Word of God in the form of a human life. God couldn't say all he wanted to say in the form of a book, so he said it in the form of Jesus. ***Jesus IS what God has to say!***

The Law and the Prophets were the lesser lights in the pre-Christ night sky. They were the moon and stars. Israel could navigate through the pagan night by constellations. In a world of Stygian darkness, the moonlight and starlight emanating from the Torah and the Prophets made all the difference.

But with Christ, morning has broken, the new day has dawned, the sun of righteousness has risen with healing in its rays. Now the moon and the stars, Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets are eclipsed by the full glory of God in Christ!

The Old Testament is not on par with Jesus. The Bible is not a flat text where every passage carries the same weight. This is why Jesus says, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." When Biblicism gives the Old Testament equal authority with Christ, the Father thunders from heaven, "***No! This is my beloved Son! Listen to him!***"

If Moses says to practice capital punishment, to stone adulterers and other sinners, God says, "Listen to Jesus!" And Jesus says, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

If Elijah calls down fire from heaven to burn up his enemies, God says, "Listen to Jesus!" And Jesus says, "Love your enemies."

The Pharisees in their desire to condemn sinners to death can quote the Bible and cite Moses. But Jesus says something else.

James and John, in their zeal to go "shock and awe" on the Samaritans and call down fire from heaven, can quote the Bible and cite Elijah. ***But Jesus says something else.***

The role of the Old Testament is to give an inspired telling of how we get to Jesus. But once we get to Jesus we don't build multiple tabernacles to "balance out" Jesus. Jesus is greater than Moses. Jesus is greater than Elijah. Jesus is greater than Biblicism. Moses can stone sinners and Elijah can burn up enemies, but for a Christian that doesn't matter. ***We follow Jesus.***

I'm a Christian, not a Biblicist. Yet I love the Old Testament. I read it everyday. I call it Sacred Scripture. But I never read it without Jesus. I don't read the Law and the Prophets by the light of Moses and Elijah; I read the Law and the Prophets in the light of Christ.

"A voice came out of the cloud, 'This is my beloved Son, listen to him!' And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only."—Mark 9:7, 8

The final testimony of Moses and Elijah is to recede into the background so that Jesus stands alone as the full and true Word of God. ***Jesus IS what God has to say!*** □

—Brian Zahnd

# Inspired, Infallible & Inerrant

BY GREG ALBRECHT

**A**t some point in the past you may have fallen for some theological pied piper who lured you down a sawdust trail with selected biblical passages, lining them up as proof texts to say what the piper wanted them to mean.

During this 2015 “Year of the Bible” we are providing deeper insight for our readers and listeners to better understand and interpret the Bible—so as to avoid biblical wild goose chases

and theological snipe hunts. We value the Bible, but our absolute priority is Jesus. We believe Jesus is the heart and core of what the Bible is about.

**We have a “high” view of Scripture, but most of all, we have the highest view of Jesus.** Jesus is both the author and the subject of the written revelation we have—he is the Alpha and Omega. Jesus, we believe, should be the beginning of our discussion about the Bible and he should be the end.

In response to some of what we have already said and written during this year so far, many readers and listeners have asked about these two passages in particular—Psalm 12:6, and 2 Timothy 3:16:



**INSPIRED:** FILLED WITH AN ANIMATING OR EXALTING INFLUENCE. OUTSTANDING OR BRILLIANT IN A WAY OR TO A DEGREE SUGGESTIVE OF DIVINE INSPIRATION.

**INFALLIBLE:** INCAPABLE OF ERROR, NOT LIABLE TO MISLEAD, DECEIVE OR DISAPPOINT.

**INERRANT:** FREE FROM ERROR, EXEMPT FROM ERROR.

examples) that differ and contradict one another. If someone insists that “every word” of the Bible rather than the Christ-centered message of the Bible is to be understood as “flawless” then how can we explain contradictory references?

Indeed, what is the Bible? Is this book of ink and paper holy, infallible and inerrant as God is? Surely God did not intend that this written revelation, as you and I read it during these early years of the 21st century, be enshrined as unimpeachable and faultless.

If God intended to produce an infallible and inerrant literary document, surely he would not have used so many fallible humans in the writing, editing, preservation, translation, production and printing (not to mention interpretation) of the Bible!

Some will insist that since God is infallible, so too must his word (meaning the Bible) be infallible. But there is much

Back to the flawless “words” in Psalm 12:6. The teaching here has more to do with the flawless *promises* of God than they do specific flawless words (originally in Hebrew and later translated into English). “Flawless” in Psalm 12:6 has to do with God’s honesty and trustworthiness, as opposed to the lies and deception of “those who malign” the weak and needy (vs. 5).

Once we understand the background and intent of Psalm 12:6 we realize it would be a mistake to assume this passage is a direct reference to the paper and ink book we call the Bible today.

**2 Timothy 3:16** “All Scripture is God-breathed...” If portions of the Bible contain observable, no-doubt-about-it errors, then terms like “inerrant” or “infallible” do not accurately describe the nature of the 66 individual books we call the Bible.

But what about “God-breathed”? Traditionally, 2 Timothy 3:16 was translated to speak of Scripture as “inspired”—not “God-breathed.” A majority of scholars agree that “God-breathed” is a translation

**If God intended to produce an infallible and inerrant literary document, surely he would not have used so many fallible humans in the writing, editing, preservation, translation, production and printing (not to mention interpretation) of the Bible!**

**Psalm 12:6** “...the words of the LORD are flawless...” Is every word printed in the Bible the word of the LORD, and in what sense might we understand the Bible as flawless? The Bible recounts the reigns of kings or the numbers of people killed in battles (among many other

that God creates and produces that is not infallible—including you and me!

Since Jesus is the Word of God (John 1) we must ask how anyone might presume to refer to the Bible as the “word of God,” thus sharing the deity of the Eternal Word (Jesus) with a book?

favored by more modern interpreters, seemingly by theologians in an attempt to bolster their teaching on a Reformation doctrine called “sola scriptura” (which CWR/PTM articles have discussed elsewhere).

Older translations favor the word “inspired.” The



Authorized King James of 1611 translates 2 Timothy 3:16 as, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God...”

In fact, even some modern translations, such as The New English Translation (1970) which is highly regarded, says “Every inspired scripture has its use for teaching...”

And here’s the rub on the way this passage is often “used.” Many insist that all

**We must resist flattening all texts of the Bible so that every word and every passage are given equal authority to the Word who is Jesus. We insist that a Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture is the highest goal, for Jesus is in fact the central theme and core message of all Scripture.**

cheek, yet many of the “God-breathed” folks forget about that teaching when it comes to patriotic flag-waving when their nation “under God” goes to war. Suddenly, God is with their nation more than he is

with other nations of the world—the *whole* world that God also loves (according to John 3:16).

Other of the “God-breathed” folks stipulate and insist on parts of the Mosaic Law as being “in force” for New Testament Christians—ten-percent tithing (for the word *tithing* has a specific meaning) for example.

So, in effect, many of the “God-breathed” folks are

in reality only defending interpretations that are in line with the biblical interpretation they propound and proclaim, while studiously avoiding or bending passages that trouble them.

### **Fallible Translations**

The undeniable reality of biblical fallibility confronts the *bibliolatry* practiced by some within Christendom (and insisted on de facto by some denominational theologies and faith statements). The notion of biblical infallibility and

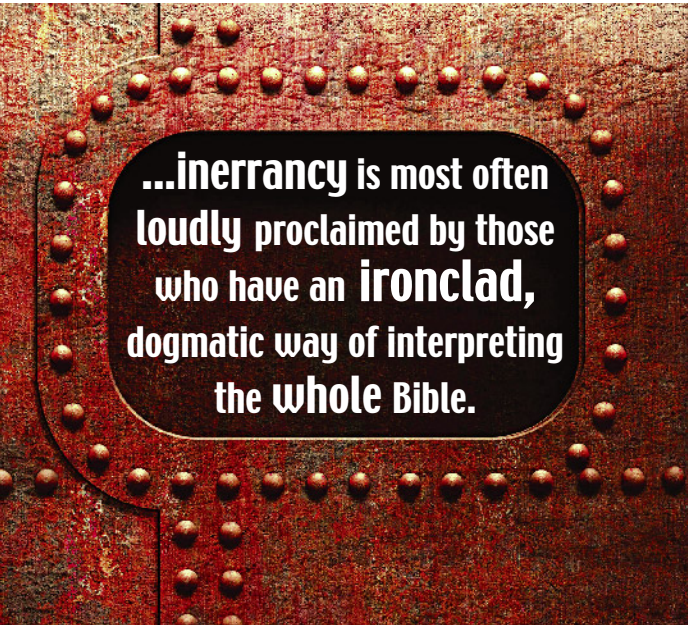
inerrancy is most often loudly proclaimed by those who have **an ironclad, dogmatic way of interpreting the whole Bible.** Thus, in their world, **their views and perspectives are in fact, inerrant and infallible**, and all other perspectives about the Bible are not “God breathed”—like their views and perspectives.

For example, many read the Bible with the primary assumption that every historical event and teaching literally happened exactly as the biblical text says. They have little room for poetry, metaphor or symbol unless there is absolutely no other way to understand that portion of Scripture.

Insisting on reading the Bible “literally” is probably the least effective spiritual way of understanding the Bible. Our capacity to understand if something actually happened is informed and biased by the era in which we live, the culture that surrounds us and the religious precepts and customs we have been taught.

We intuitively know that when Jesus said we must cut off our hand or poke out our eye, he did not mean it literally, but symbolically. But our intuition does not always get us safely past erroneous teachings that are derived from literalisms insisted on by some religious authorities.

Religious dogma and unbending, concrete notions of



**...inerrancy is most often loudly proclaimed by those who have an ironclad, dogmatic way of interpreting the whole Bible.**

Scripture is God-breathed until they come to a passage challenging their cherished denominational views.

For example, Paul says in Galatians 3:28 that we are all one in Christ, including male and female. But ask women how Paul’s “God-breathed” passage has worked out for them as the rubber has hit the road of practice and teaching in many churches who believe all Scripture to be “God breathed.”

Jesus says to love our enemies, to turn the other



doctrine have even influenced the translation of the Bibles you and I read. Here are two examples of how the Bible that we know is fallible given the bias and prejudice of translators:

1) Translators who worked on the 1611 King James Authorized version believed that the practice of baptism was the sprinkling or pouring of water, normally on an infant. When they came to the task of translating the New Testament Greek word *baptizo*, they could see that it carries the sense of immersion. They did not translate *baptizo* as immersion, for to do so would have done violence to their beliefs. And of course, we can't have the Bible disagreeing with our religion, can we? They transliterated the word so that religion was free to interpret the English word "baptism" as they wished.

The obvious lesson: translators of the Bible have been influenced by their theological background. We can applaud and be thankful for the tireless work of translators—but we must face the evidence that their beliefs influenced their translations.

2) When translators came to the word *ekklesia*, they recognized that the word itself had to do with an assembly of people, but they reasoned that a religious assembly had more to do with what they knew, as Christians, some 1500 years later. So, again they overlaid their translation with their

cultural and religious realities—with their institutions, doctrinal dogmas and actual buildings. Thus, they translated *ekklesia* as "church" rather than "assembly."

But when they came to the word *ekklesia* as it appears in Acts 19:32, they realized it really would not do to have "the church" rioting, in confusion and shouting "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." In this instance, they reverted to the actual meaning of *ekklesia*

as punctuation. But some manuscripts were written in *scriptio-continua* (Latin for continuous script). When a manuscript was written in *scriptio-continua* there were no spaces between words and punctuation. It doesn't take much thought to realize that interpretation inevitably took place as spaces were created and punctuation added.

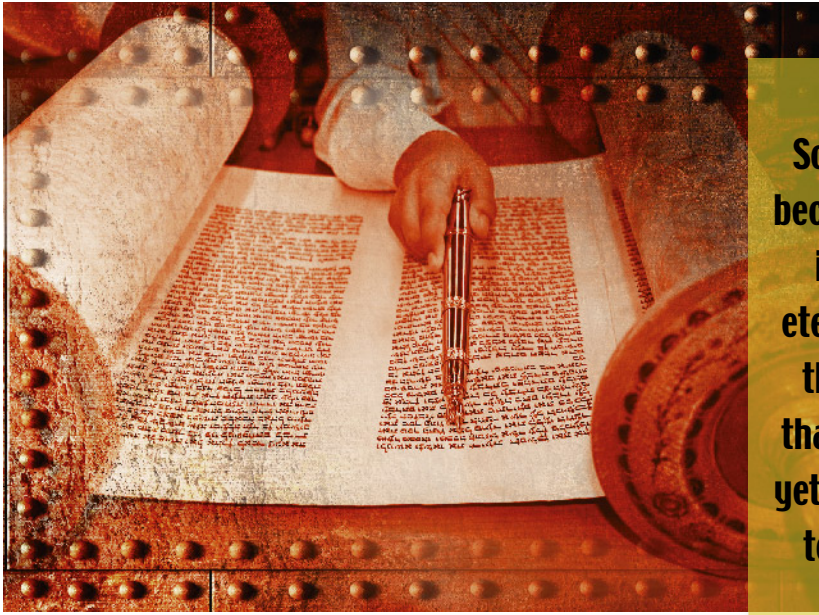
Theoretically, one copyist might separate the sentence

**Jesus alone is the divine, infallible and inerrant Word of God.... Those who demand an infallible religious book do not necessarily have the high ground when it comes to serving our Lord Jesus Christ, regardless of the volume and intensity of their rather shaky theology.**

as an assembly of people (regardless of the reason or motivation for assembling). When translators translated *ekklesia* as "church," did they do so inerrantly?

When you and I read the translation of the Bible we prefer, we benefit from the practice of *word-spacing* as well

"whatisthatintheroadahead" to say "what is that in the road ahead?" or another might separate it to say "what is that in the road, a head?" Some scholars believe that there are more variations in the translated manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.



**"You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).**



So it's all very well and good to say that all Scripture is "God-breathed," but how is it inspired, and what changes have been made to the Bibles we read?

### **Fervor and Zeal About the Bible**

Sadly, there is much strife and controversy about the nature of the Bible, and it seems that many human religious authorities have manipulated their adherents into these heated debates.

As pitched battles are fought about a book and the words it contains, many completely miss the Word of God who is the theme and purpose of that book. As Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day—those who carefully studied the words of their Bible, the Old Testament—"You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).

Jesus alone is the divine, infallible and inerrant Word of God. Jesus is the infallible and inerrant message and theme of the Bible. Those who demand an infallible religious book do not necessarily have the high ground when it comes to serving our Lord Jesus Christ, regardless of the volume and intensity of their rather shaky theology.

We must resist flattening all texts of the Bible so that every word and every passage are given equal authority to the Word who is Jesus. We insist that a Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture is the highest goal, for Jesus is in fact the central theme and core message of all Scripture.

We contend that the Bible must be read according to the

**Shifting from the Bible as our inerrant authority to Christ as our final Word can be disorienting at first, but such an experience is par for the course....**

genre in which each passage was written and inspired, and that all interpretations begin with what that passage meant to the original audience.

To leapfrog over the meaning intended for the original audience is to jump to huge conclusions that will (and have) put many people in a theological ditch, often, ironically, aligned against Jesus and the gospel.

Shifting from the Bible as our inerrant authority to Christ as our final Word can be disorienting at first. But such an experience is par for the course:

check out the many cases in the Gospels when the teachings of Jesus confused and upset people, turning their spiritual apple carts upside down.

Disorientation can be the starting point of spiritual growth. All who are in Christ, and all in whom he lives his risen life, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior.

As our Master, he is teaching us and leading us into all truth, gently and mercifully. I am not insisting that everyone who may read or hear what we teach here at CWR/PTM should fall into lockstep compliance—we are simply asking for people

**...check out the many cases in the Gospels when the teachings of Jesus confused and upset people... Disorientation can be the starting point of spiritual growth.**

to examine their faith, for indeed such a request is biblical (see 2 Corinthians 13:5).

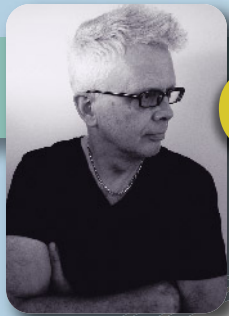
There is one and only one Word of God—

his name is Jesus. The biblical revelation, itself a message inspired by God, is not infallible, inerrant or perfect—it is a written revelation of the Eternal Word, who alone is perfect, holy, inerrant and infallible.

We worship Jesus and Jesus alone—the Bible is not on the throne, but rather Jesus alone is King, he alone is Lord. I suggest that some have transferred the fervor and zeal that belongs to Jesus to a book. Jesus is the Word of God. □

*For more information on this topic, see RP039 The Bible: What It Is & What It Isn't on our website, [www.ptm.org](http://www.ptm.org).*





# CWRm

DAVID HAYWARD

THE NAKED PASTOR

## Does Recovering from Religion Have to Be So Morose?

**J**esus, in the famous poem “Footprints in the Sand”, says, “*The times when you have seen only one set of footprints is when I carried you.*” Carl Jung said, “*Walk your path or be dragged.*” This version seems more accurate for my life. Actually, that’s not what this is about. This is about the question, “Does recovering from religion have to be so morose?”

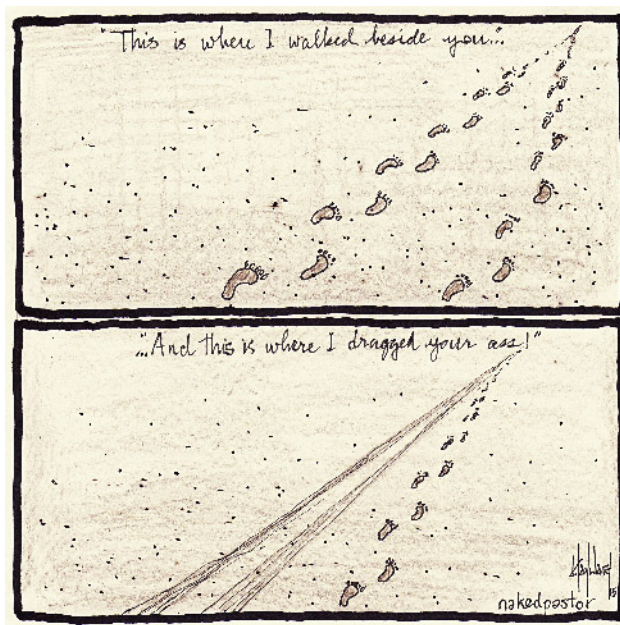
Recently, a friend commented on my cartoon and blog post saying that he misses the funnier cartoons I used to post and that I seem to be focusing more and more on the privileges and abuses of power. He’s not the only one. Others have mentioned the same concern. This cartoon is in their honor to hopefully show that I haven’t lost my sense of humor.

It is true. I have focused more on the privileges and abuses of power because I think it is the core consideration about communities, including religious or spiritual ones. It is serious business. And, to be honest, when I do cartoon and write about this, I know I’m helping a lot of people embrace their experiences, trust their guts, find their voices, muster their courage, and liberate their lives.

**But it doesn’t and can’t stop there. I also want to help people find their happiness.**

You might not realize this, but I laugh a lot. There have been seasons where I haven’t. But I’m generally a happy person, in spite of what many people think. And I generally help other people laugh or at least smile every day, in spite of what many people think about that too.

That’s one of the learned skills of recovering from religion or deconstruction. Sure, we go through morose stages. But I’ve seen it over and over, not only in my own life but in the lives of others, that it is totally possible to achieve a place of joy again.



CARTOON BY DAVID HAYWARD

**My desire is to turn this possibility into an inevitability. So the answer is...**

**NO!** Recovering from religion does NOT always have to be so morose. You can be happy, even following the worst abuses, or even in the midst of the most burning questions and profound confusions. □

—David Hayward



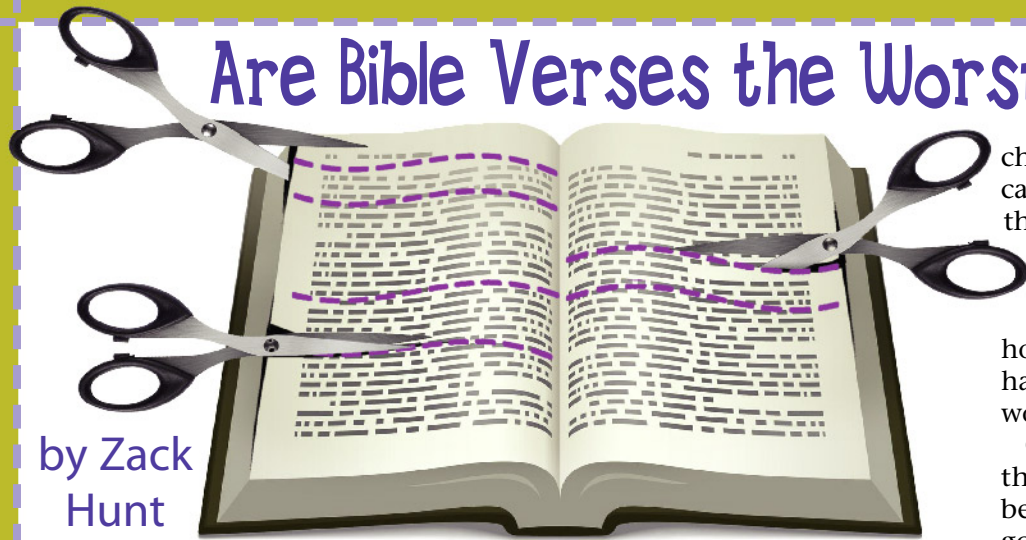
Will the real  
“Word of God”  
please stand up!



**Jesus alone is the infallible Word of God (John 1:1).**

During our CWR/PTM 2015 “Year of the Bible” we are studying and examining the Bible (the lower-case word of God) from a Christ-centered (the upper-case Word of God) perspective. The *word* of God is inspired by the *Word* of God. But by God’s divine plan, humans have been profoundly involved in writing, editing, translating, preserving and publishing the Bible. Touched by human hands, the Bible cannot be seen as infallible or inerrant. Jesus alone, the Word of God, is infallible and inerrant. Stay tuned during our “Year of the Bible” for Christ-centered perspective, teaching and insight.

# Are Bible Verses the Worst Thing Ever?



by Zack  
Hunt

**B**ribing kids with candy (or other prizes) to memorize Bible verses is an ancient tradition. By ancient, I mean it dates back to at least the 1980s when I was a kid and I just assume everything from my childhood is the way it's always been and, therefore, the way it always should be.

In theory, teaching children to memorize Scripture is a wonderful thing. After all, if our faith is biblically based, then knowing a thing or two about the Bible would probably come in handy from time to time. But in practice, **our love for Bible verses can be incredibly problematic.**

**In fact, Bible verses might be the worst thing ever.**

I know that may sound strange, perhaps even bordering on the blasphemous, but hang with me for a moment.

Believe it or not, the chapters and verses that divide our modern Bibles today didn't exist for the first 1,000 years or so of Christianity. Which was awful for Sunday School kids back then, because they had to memorize entire books of the Bible just to get a piece of butterscotch candy they didn't really want in the first place.

When the books of the Bible were first written down, they were read and discussed in

much greater length than we typically do today. Sure, the Psalms were often read or sung one at a time and specific Levitical laws were analyzed and debated over individually or just a few at a time, but when Nehemiah rediscovered the book of Deuteronomy, he didn't have Ezra read selected portions. *He read the entire thing to the people of Israel.* Likewise, Paul's letters in the New Testament were intended to be read in their entirety to the congregation to whom he was writing—just like we would read an entire letter today.

Sure, particular stories like that of Noah and his ark were told without slogging through the entire book of Genesis, but it wasn't until the 13th century when a guy named Stephen Langton, a Cardinal and Archbishop of Canterbury, began dividing the Bible into more easily accessible portions that our modern chapters began to appear. Verses followed later as a way to further subdivide these newly created chapters into easy-to-cite passages of Scripture.

I imagine at the time it seemed like a revolution in biblical studies. Scholars could converse more easily with each other about what part of scripture was being debated and

children could rack up the candy far more quickly now that they had less to memorize.

## Chopping Up the Bible

Nearly a thousand years later, however, chapters and verses have become decidedly less wonderful.

On the most basic level (and this isn't anything new; it began the moment Langton got to work), chapters and verses chop up scripture in ways it was never intended, allowing modern readers to focus on small portions of a much bigger conversation and thereby miss the crucial context for understanding the verse we're focused on.

**Context is everything and without it a particular verse can be warped, twisted, or cut and pasted with other verses to create a meaning the original author never intended.**

It's this proof-texting (ripping verses out of their proper context to prove a point) that leads to legalism, fundamentalism, and all sorts of other -isms that turn the Bible into a weapon of war instead of a message of peace.

On one end of the problematic spectrum you've got a verse like Jeremiah 29:11, *For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

We love quoting that verse at graduation ceremonies, but the thing is, it doesn't really have anything to do with us. At least not directly (2 Corinthians 1:20). God was initially speaking specifically to the children of Israel while they were in exile. It was a promise to them that one day their exile would end. It



wasn't a divine promise to an 18 year old American high school student that they would become rich and famous after graduation. But by virtue of its verse-edness (Is that a word? Well, it is now!), all context and proper understanding for that passage has been lost and today it's become little more than a proof-text for the prosperity gospel.

### **Big Problems Caused by Verses**

But verses can create bigger problems than that.

Take Paul's infamous words from 1 Corinthians 14:34, *Women should be silent in the church*. Or 1 Timothy 2:12 in which he wrote, *I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet*. Despite the fact that Paul also wrote that **all are one in Christ Jesus, involved women in places of leadership in his ministry**, and ignoring the fact that **Jesus also made women a central part of his ministry** (including choosing women to be the first ones to proclaim the resurrection), the isolation of these verses allows them to be stripped of both their biblical and historical context in order to relegate women to second class citizenship in the Church.

But verses can create even bigger problems than that.

We consider ourselves to be fairly enlightened people today, folks who understand and value the importance of things like equality and justice. The idea that one person could be the property of another person is universally deplored in the Church today...**but that wasn't always the case**. Paul's words in

Colossians 3:22 and Ephesians 6:5 in which he says, *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ*, and Peter's command in 1 Peter 2:18 that *You who are slaves must accept the authority of your masters with all respect*, have been used for centuries as proof-texts to justify the enslavement, exploitation, and oppression of countless millions of people.

And, of course, that's just the tip of the iceberg of the myriad of ways in which the creation of chapters and verses has empowered us to justify our legalism, sanctify our bigotry, and proof-text our oppression of people we don't like.

Now, as someone who spent the better part of a decade studying the faith in the academy, I am fully aware of how helpful the division of scripture can be in that sort of setting. Likewise, having been on both sides of the pulpit, I realize that going through an entire book like Matthew or Acts on a Sunday morning (at least in the way we're used to in modern sermons) is neither possible for the preacher nor particularly appealing for the congregation.

So, yes, there are certainly times in which chapters and verses can be helpful as reference points so long as as we understand how incredibly narrow our perspective is in that moment and how limited our understanding of that passage will be if we do not venture out further into the text.

However, I am convinced that the benefits, insights and understanding to be gleaned

from being forced to retell an entire story and wade through its context and commentary far outweighs whatever convenience chapters and verses might afford. And again, that is to say nothing of the very real problems that a "plain reading" of those chapters and verses has created and continues to create in the lives of very real people.

I acknowledge that there is no going back to a time without chapters and verses (though there is a noble attempt to turn back the clock). But this inability to reverse the tide of history simply means we must be that much more diligent in our study of Scripture and always resist the temptation to chop up the Bible into little pieces we can put back together (or not) however we see fit.

If we can do that, not only will we have a better understanding of the Bible, but maybe, just maybe, we'll also do a better job of being disciples of Jesus.

**So, is dividing the Bible into chapters and verses the worst thing ever?**

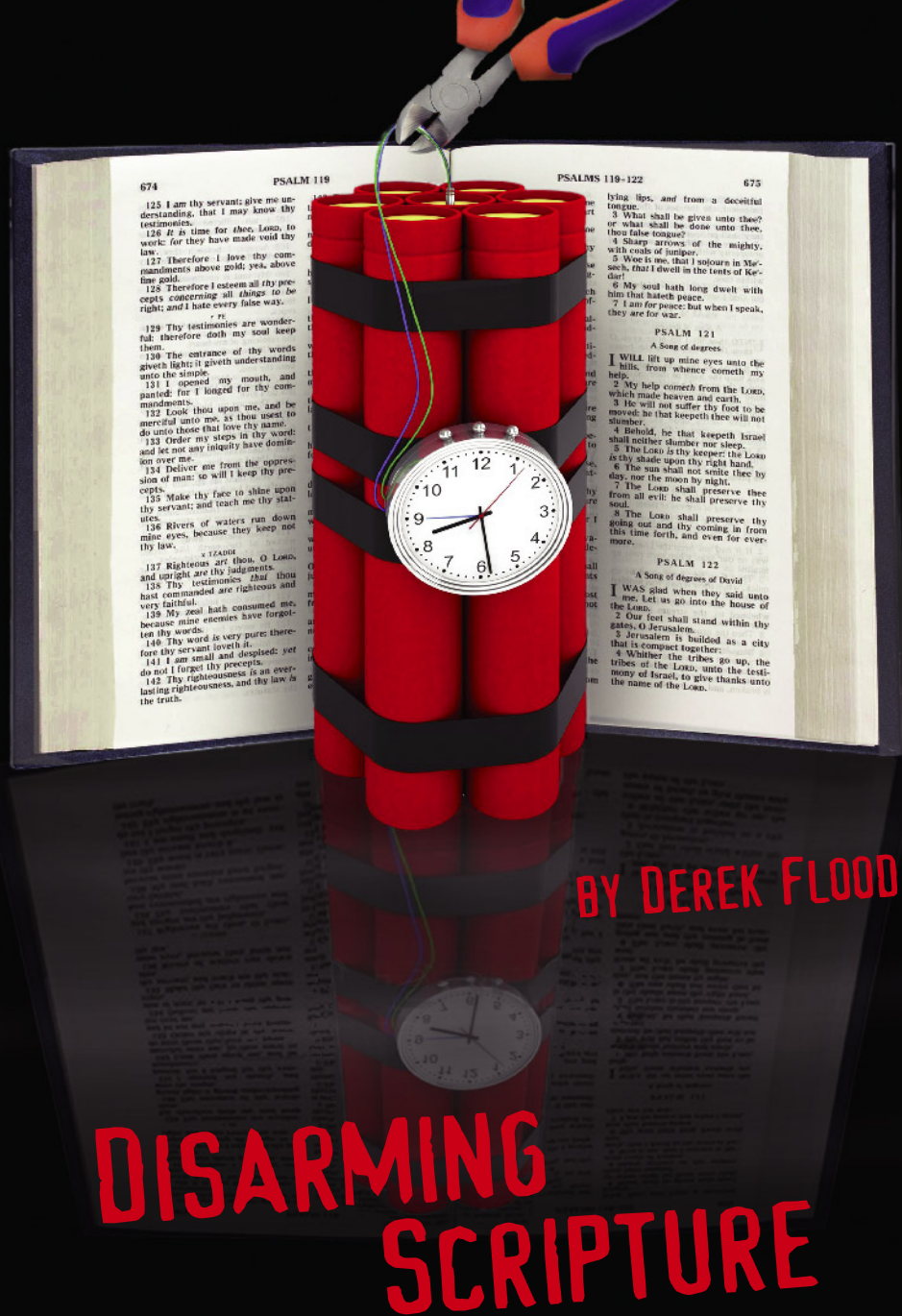
Maybe not and maybe things would have turned out the same either way, but **considering how they've empowered and continue to empower people to sanctify the oppression, exploitation, marginalization, enslavement, abuse and even death of countless souls, I think the world would probably be much better off if Bible verses had never been created.** □

© 2014 Reprinted by permission. Originally published on [zackhunt.net](http://zackhunt.net)

*Zack Hunt is a writer, blogger and youth ministry veteran living in Bristol, Connecticut, with his wife, Kim, and daughter, Ainsley. A recent graduate of Yale Divinity school, he blogs at [zackhunt.net](http://zackhunt.net).*

**It's this proof-texting (ripping verses out of their proper context to prove a point) that leads to legalism, fundamentalism, and all sorts of other -isms that turn the Bible into a weapon of war instead of a message of peace.**





The flat and frozen way of reading Scripture often presents itself as the only “safe” way to interpret the Bible. Listen to these words from John Henry Hopkins writing in the 19th century:

“If it were a matter to be determined by personal sympathies, tastes or feelings, I should be as ready as any man to condemn the institution of slavery, for all prejudices of education, habit, and social position stand entirely opposed to it. But as a Christian... I am compelled to submit my weak and erring intellect to the authority of the Almighty. For then only can I be safe in my conclusions.”

The assumption here is that the “safe” way to read the Bible is to disregard our moral conscience, our compassion, our sense of right and wrong, ignoring everything we know about human psychology and mental health, and instead blindly follow a text or law. This leads Hopkins to support the institution of slavery.

In reality, however, as Hopkins’ example sadly illustrates, a reading devoid of conscience is anything but safe. It is precisely this kind of “safe” way of reading the Bible that has led people throughout history to commit unspeakable acts of cruelty and violence in the name of God. The problem is therefore not so much with the content of the Bible itself as it is learning to break away from a fundamentalist reading

**Editor’s Note:** The following is an excerpt from Derek Flood’s new book *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did*.

*Disarming Scripture* was published earlier this year, and has received endorsements and accolades from several prominent Christian writers, including Walter Brueggemann, Jim Wallis, Peter Enns and Steve Chalke.

This new book by Derek Flood deals with violence in Scripture, tackling a wide range of troubling passages—from commands to commit genocide and infanticide in the Old Testament to passages in the New Testament that have been used to justify slavery, child abuse, and state violence.

Moving beyond typical conservative and liberal approaches, which seek to either defend or whitewash over violence in the Bible, *Disarming Scripture* takes a surprising yet compelling approach: Learning to read the Bible like Jesus did.

Here is an excerpt from chapter six of the book:



THE ASSUMPTION HERE IS THAT THE “SAFE” WAY TO READ THE BIBLE IS TO DISREGARD OUR MORAL CONSCIENCE, OUR COMPASSION, OUR SENSE OF RIGHT AND WRONG... AND INSTEAD BLINDLY FOLLOW A TEXT OR LAW.

that leads to shutting down our conscience and justifying harm in God’s name.

Today in our culture we regard slavery as self-evidently immoral. However, because their approach to the Bible itself has not changed, this leads many conservative Christians to continue to apply the same “safe” reading, promoting violence in other areas. Consider the following words by a contemporary Christian author (writing in 2005) promoting the corporal punishment of children, noting how similar the argument sounds to the one above by Hopkins:

“I would have never spanked them had I not been persuaded by the Word of God that God called me to this task. It is not my personality. Margy and I were exposed to some teaching from the book of Proverbs that convinced us that spanking had a valid place in parenting. We became persuaded that failure to spank would be unfaithfulness to their souls.”

Again, we have someone going against their conscience, doing something they personally feel is wrong because they think this is what God demands of them, and moreover writing a book urging other parents to do the same—to go against their consciences, against their own

parental sense of compassion, because the Bible supposedly tells them to. “You have no choice.” He writes, “You are acting in obedience to God. It is your duty.”

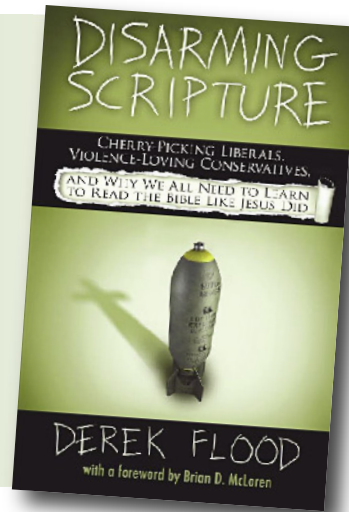
At issue here is not so much the relative merit of the exact parental advice given by this author (which I happen to strongly disagree with), but far more importantly his claim that as Christians we are obligated as parents to blindly obey these directives, rather than working through these issues thoughtfully while listening to our conscience.

Parenting is a tremendous responsibility, and so it is vital to pay attention to our doubts and our conscience as we work

...A READING DEVOID OF CONSCIENCE IS ANYTHING BUT SAFE. IT IS PRECISELY THIS KIND OF “SAFE” WAY OF READING THE BIBLE THAT HAS LED PEOPLE THROUGHOUT HISTORY TO COMMIT UNSPEAKABLE ACTS OF CRUELTY AND VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF GOD.

through what is best for our kids. To instead say that parents are duty-bound to God to ignore their conscience, ignore their sense of compassion, as well as explicitly instructing his readers to ignore their pediatricians’ advice is a staggering recipe for disaster.

Because the approach to interpretation has not changed, the argument made here by this author in the 21st century is an exact parallel to that made by Hopkins in the 19th century. Echoing Hopkins, almost word for word, he writes, “Experience is



an unsafe guide. The only safe guide is the Bible.”

### Reading the Bible While Ignoring the Conscience

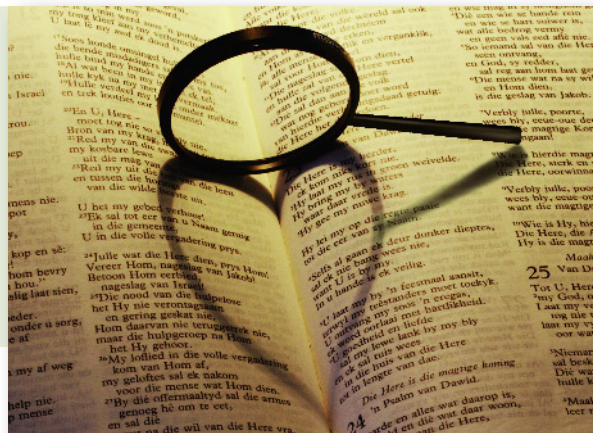
The tragic reality however is that abrogating our moral responsibility as parents is anything but safe. This is the bitter fruit of reading

the Bible against one’s conscience. It has led countless people in the past to justify the brutal and inhumane institution of slavery, and it continues today to lead many conservative Evangelicals to be some of the most outspoken advocates, not only of corporal punishment of children, but equally of gender inequality, discrimination against sexual minorities, torture, capital punishment, and of course war—all in a tragically

misguided attempt to be “faithful” to the Bible.

The unquestioning and authoritarian way of reading the Bible is anything but safe. In fact, it’s profoundly dangerous and harmful. We need to instead plot out the trajectory of where Jesus’ life-giving and counter-cultural message of grace and enemy love can take us, working to practically apply this to increasingly reducing violence and oppression in every area of our lives and world.

This raises an important question: How do we identify the direction Jesus is going?



## IN ORDER FOR A JESUS-LENS TO BE PRACTICAL WE NEED TO DIG DEEPER... RECOGNIZING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE WAY OF UNQUESTIONING OBEDIENCE THAT CHARACTERIZED HOW THE PHARISEES INTERPRETED SCRIPTURE, AND JESUS' WAY OF FAITHFUL QUESTIONING WHICH FOCUSED ON LOVE AS THE AIM OF SCRIPTURE.

How do we know what to embrace, and what to reject? How do we know for example that we should go beyond where the Bible did and abolish slavery, rather than upholding it? Are we simply following the accepted norms of our culture in regards to slavery today?

Many have suggested that we need to focus on Jesus. It has become increasingly popular for example to propose that we should read the Bible through a "Jesus-shaped" lens. This Jesus-shaped focus (or Christocentric focus, as it is often called) has been proposed by many as the key interpretive lens through which we must read all of Scripture—especially when dealing with troubling texts and countering a biblicist mindset.

However, this begs the question: Which interpretation of Jesus? There are of course those who seek to use Jesus to promote violent authoritarian readings of Scripture. How do we know that their reading is wrong, and one focused instead on compassion and enemy love is right? Further, how would this Jesus-lens work with difficulties in the New Testament itself such as the issue of slavery?

### How Jesus Read Scripture

In order for a Jesus-lens to be practical we need to dig deeper

to uncover the underlying hermeneutical lens that Jesus himself used as he read Scripture, and learn to apply this ourselves as we read. As we have seen, a central aspect of that is recognizing the difference between the way of unquestioning obedience that characterized how the Pharisees interpreted Scripture, and Jesus' way of faithful questioning which focused on love as the aim of Scripture.

If we truly wish to read the Bible in the way Jesus did, then this means that we need to evaluate everything based on its merit. If something is good, then we should be able to demonstrate its goodness in practice. This is the method Jesus himself proposed when he told us that we could spot a false prophet by looking at their fruits (Matthew 7:16). By their fruits you will recognize them—that is the evaluative criterion Jesus gives us to use.

We therefore can evaluate a biblical claim by its fruits, by the evidence of its observable effects in people's lives—evaluating whether it results in flourishing or harm, peace or devastation. We look at the fruits in life and observe if they are sweet or rotten. This is our evaluative benchmark.

Because we know based on observable evidence that child abuse and slavery are deeply harmful, this leads us to reassess how we have understood God to be endorsing them in Scripture, just as the discovery

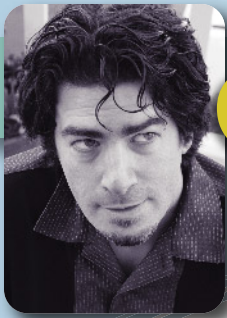
that the earth revolved around the sun has caused the church to re-assess its geocentric model of the universe.

This does not necessarily mean that the Bible is wrong on these points. It could very well be that we have misread the Bible, and need to dig deeper to uncover what is really being said. For example, one could argue that the geocentric view found in Scripture is better understood as a pre-scientific phenomenological perspective that is misunderstood when taken as a scientific description.

Be that as it may, the bottom line is that our interpretation of Scripture needs to coincide with actual reality, and this is most important where it affects ethics. We cannot afford to shut down our mind and conscience as we read. On the contrary, a moral reading of Scripture requires that we fully engage both our mind and conscience. If we therefore recognize that a particular interpretation leads to observable harm, this necessarily means that we need to stop and reassess our course. To continue on a course we know to be harmful, simply because "the Bible says so," is morally irresponsible. □

*Derek Flood is the author of Disarming Scripture and Healing the Gospel. He is a featured blogger for Huffington Post, Sojourners and Red Letter Christians. Visit his website [theRebelGod.com](http://theRebelGod.com).*





# CWRm

DEREK FLOOD

THE REBEL GOD

## Defending the Bible?

*This is what the Lord Almighty says ... attack the Amalekites.... Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants (1 Samuel 15:2-3).*

*O daughter Babylon...Blessed is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks! (Psalm 137:8-9).*

**T**hese biblical passages are unsettling. They are not simply about God's judgment. They command people to kill other people in God's name—including infants! How can we, as Christians, reconcile passages like these with the God revealed in Jesus who commands us to love our enemies?

Many biblical scholars attempt to defend Scripture by downplaying or justifying the violence in some way. Some argue that the call to genocide was justified so that Israel would not be infected by the religion of the Canaanites. This argument bears a chilling similarity to those used by the Third Reich.

It is hard to imagine anything more morally abhorrent than smashing a baby's head against rocks, or committing genocide in God's name. Such actions are always categorically unjustifiable.

In fact, the only reason one would even question this is because of the belief that biblical commands override conscience. When the Bible challenges and deepens our moral vision, this is a good thing, but when it leads us to abandon basic notions of morality, something is horribly wrong.

What causes otherwise decent, loving people to defend genocide in God's name? I think the problem lies in the basic approach they take to reading the Bible, which seeks to show how it all fits together in harmony. I was taught this approach, and I bet you were too. In a way it makes sense: If the Bible is the inspired word of God, then shouldn't it have one consistent message?

So we seek to read in a way that weaves all these disparate parts together—and we come up with a rather schizophrenic picture of God.

As we can see, when applied to passages like the ones above it leads otherwise decent people to become advocates of appalling moral atrocity. And what is perhaps even more shocking, they think that in doing so they are defending God's honor by defending the Bible.

I'd like to propose another way of reading the Bible that seeks to identify a trajectory of moral development, and then follows in that same trajectory.

Consider the example of Martin Luther King Jr. The Bible was his inspiration. However, it's hard to argue for the abolition of slavery from a proof-texting approach to the New Testament. Yet, Christians today take it as self-evident that slavery is wrong. King sets an example by following in the trajectory set by Paul who declares, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Paul championed opening up the Gospel to all peoples, so it's a safe bet that he would have cheered when King sought equality for all people regardless of race. King went beyond Paul, but he followed in the same trajectory.

There was a clear shift from the time of the violent passages above to Jesus' command to love our enemies. There is an obvious discontinuity between these two understandings of God. We see a major change in trajectory within the Bible itself that leads us away from a violent tribal conception of God toward a God seen in Jesus that demonstrates enemy-love.

Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, *and they will do even greater things than these*" (John 14:12). If that's true, perhaps faithfulness to Scripture does not mean holding on to it with clenched fists no matter how wrong it seems. Maybe instead it means learning to make it soar by faithfully following its trajectory into the new. □

—Derek Flood

## Welcome to the Wide Open Spaces of **CWR**audio

- Tired of being exploited, treated like part of a captive herd, branded with the dogma of denominationalism?
- Tired of being rounded up by religious authorities who fatten you up with spiritual junk food in their “holy” feed lot?
- Tired of humanly imposed restrictions, walls, fences and denominational boundaries?
- Tired of being told that Jesus can only be found within the confines of a particular parcel of religious real estate?
- Tired of being told God is mad at you and the only way to make him happy is to appease him by continually being in the “right” place at the “right” time doing the “right” things?

Come experience freedom in Christ! Come experience free range Christianity! Come and be part of *CWRa (Christianity Without the Religion audio)*—a worldwide, grass roots movement of Christ-followers.

Come and join Greg Albrecht at [www.ptm.org](http://www.ptm.org) for *faith alone*, *grace alone* and *Christ alone* teaching! Come join *CWRa*—a grace-based ministry free from religious additives and preservatives—where you will always be pointed to our religion-free Bread of Life.

You'll find a summary of each weekly *CWRa* sermon for the next three months below. Join us and tell a friend!

**Out-of-Control Grace** If anyone ever had the right to be a control freak with others, it was Jesus—but he turned down that job description. Week of September 6

**God Gave Them Over...** The first chapter of Romans says God “gives us over” to the consequences of wrath which we choose by virtue of our decisions, rather than the wrath some believe he rains down because he is enraged. Week of September 13

**You Have Good Credit!** The credit granted by the bank of heaven is not based on our own credit record, but rather through righteousness that is given in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Week of September 20

**What About Me?** In an age of selfies and Instagrams, when the constant cry seems to be “look at me” and “what about me?” our suffering Servant turns our focus to the needs of others. Week of September 27

**Snake-in-the-Grass Spiritual Narcissism** Few sins are as problematic and deeply rooted as the big lie that one's constant attention to one's own spiritual welfare will result in God's favor and pleasure. *Spiritual Narcissism* is a toxic condition whereby one's efforts to make oneself better result in an ever-worsening spiritual state. Week of October 4

**Loving God More Than Entitlements** Loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself is the heart and core of the life Jesus produces in those in whom he lives, changing the focus from self-absorption to serving others in Jesus' name. Week of October 11

**Fool's Gold** Christ-less religion is fool's gold—it glitters, giving false promises of wisdom, righteousness and power—but all that glitters is not gold. Week of October 18

**Life Keeps Coming and Life is Hard** Breaking news...we don't live in the Garden of Eden! We exist in a spiritual wilderness, in a parched, dry spiritual desert. Bad stuff happens and we can't always stop it. But there's good news! Week of October 25

**Grace Doesn't Make Sense** Jesus reveals God as our *heavenly Father*—rather than an accountant, mathematician or banker. God is not forever balancing the books to determine the nature of our relationship with him. Week of November 1

**Winning By Losing** Paul surrendered, denounced, gave up and dumped his prior religious accomplishments, credentials, diplomas and degrees that he might gain Christ. Week of November 8

**Control Freaks and God's Grace** Join Greg as he discusses how the world of cause-and-effect (of “just desserts” and spiritual incentive programs and report cards) is foreign and alien to the kingdom of heaven. Week of November 15

**Thanksgiving—More Than Just a Day** The act of giving thanks is not natural—on the physical level it must be taught and learned, while on the spiritual level it is a divine gift, granted by his grace. Week of November 22

**The Three M's** Many activities surround Christmas—sometimes the busy-ness of the Christmas season might even obscure the actual meaning of the birth of Jesus. Week of November 29